

**Fight the Good Fight. Finish the Race. Keep the Faith.**

**II Timothy 4:6-8**

**All Saints Sunday**

**November 3, 2013**

**Introduction – Life as a Journey**

Life is tough. Job said, *“Affliction does not come from the dust, nor does trouble sprout from the ground, but man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.”* (Job 5:6-7) As a kid, I used to complain, “That’s not fair!” My father would dutifully reply, as yours probably did, “Life’s not supposed to be fair.” We’ve known that life’s tough from the moment of our birth. We all came out crying – pushed out from warmth and security of the womb to a cold and challenging world.

But life has its blessings, too. The hymn-writer lists many in litany form:

*For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies,  
For the love which from our birth over and around us lies...*

*For the joy of human love, brother, sister, parent, child;  
Friends on earth and friends above; for all gentle thoughts and mild...*

Life has been often rightly viewed as a journey. It has a beginning, a progression, and a destination. The Apostle Paul used several metaphors for life. As the day of his execution drew nearer, he wrote to his disciple, Timothy, from a Roman prison:

**The Word**

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

II Timothy 4:6-8

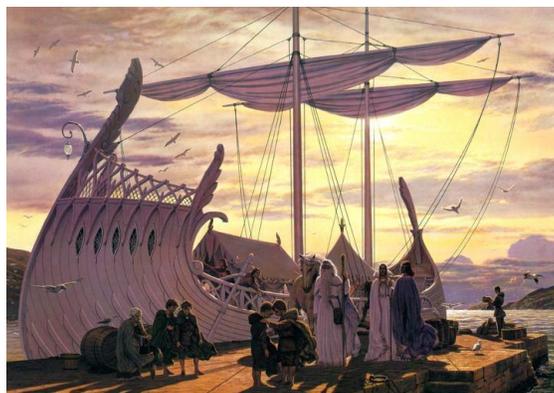
**Prayer**

**Departure**

II Timothy is the Apostle Paul’s last letter. He was being held in prison and he expected to be executed. He describes his life as one that is being “poured out as a drink offering.” The Apostle didn’t say that to curry sympathy, but rather as a confident statement of his life’s purpose. It was Paul, who years earlier had written to the church in Rome, urging them to

“present their bodies as a living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1). He was simply expressing what he believed to be the culmination of his life’s purpose.

The word that he uses for departure contains a beautiful picture of what death is for the believer. The word is *analysis*, literally, “an unloosing” as in a woven garment. The picture that Paul is painting is that of “weighing anchor” or “loosening the moorings” of a ship that is departing for a distant shore. Tolkien visualizes that concept well with Frodo’s departure at the conclusion of the Lord of the Rings Trilogy.



*Analysis* also means striking camp, taking down the tent, in order to move on to the next destination. I like that. It gives real meaning to death. It is not the end of our journey, but rather the commencement of life in God’s presence, unfettered by sin and the weaknesses of our mortal bodies.

### **Fight the Good Fight**

In both of his epistles to Timothy, the Apostle encourages him to “fight the good fight.” He would know. He experienced beatings, imprisonment and shipwreck – nearly every kind of persecution possible - because he preached the Gospel in a hostile world. And Paul did not consider his adversary non-believing people. He understood that he was in a battle – warfare with spiritual beings. *“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”* (Ephesians 6:8).

Ever get tired? Ever get weary and ask, what’s the use? It’s because following Christ entails engaging in a battle with an evil world. Satan does not want you to succeed. Throughout the New Testament, whether it is the words of Jesus, Peter, John, or Paul, we understand that to be a Christian will be challenging. We will face hardship. It is a battle. But those who wish to follow Jesus do not fight just any fight – they fight for righteousness. We fight the good fight.

## **Finish the Race**

The New Testament was written in a culture that loved competitive sports. It was the Greeks who gave us the ancient Olympic Games. Rome also valued spectator sports. It was one of Paul's favorite metaphors for the Christian life. The perseverance and discipline necessary for success on the field is the same mark of faithful Christ-followers. He wrote to the church in Corinth:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

I Corinthians 9:24-28

One of my biggest fears is having run so hard and so far in my life is that I would not finish well. I resonate deeply with the psalmist in Psalm 69:

Let not those who hope in you be put to shame through me,  
O Lord God of hosts;  
let not those who seek you be brought to dishonor through me,  
O God of Israel.

Psalm 69:6

I don't know how many days God will grant me on this earth, but, like Paul, I want to cross the finish line without quitting. I want to finish well. I think the most compelling picture of the race of life comes from the book of Hebrews. After reciting a long list of faith heroes (as we did this morning), the writer of Hebrews encourages us:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:1-2

If you're tired and worn; if you feel like giving up; keep your legs churning no matter the pain. Finish the race with your eyes on Jesus. And as we celebrate this day, you've got a great cloud of witnesses, cheering you on.

## **Keep the Faith**

When the Apostle Paul wrote his last letter to Timothy, the church had not even existed for fifty years. From its inception, Christianity faced many obstacles. First, it was Jewish persecution that tried to wipe out the new religion. Stephen was the first martyr and Peter narrowly escaped death during the same time. Shortly after Paul began evangelizing the Gentile world, zealots tried to distort the new faith by adding all the Jewish laws that they themselves could never keep. And then there were the wolves. They were the false teachers who would try to deceive new believers by slick talk and winsome ways, only to lead their followers to destruction. The early church was handicapped by not having the full New Testament and most congregations had little or no written Scriptures. Still, most kept the faith and many died for it.

The temptations in the First Century to depart from the faith were very real and obvious. And they are still very real today. We are prone to diluting the Gospel with our own cultural baggage. The prosperity Gospel whose god is really me rather than Christ continues to deceive many. Cults like Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses draw many away with their legalistic veneer of goodness without Christ. Disillusionment, discouragement, and disobedience claim many when their love for God cools and their upward gaze becomes clouded. These are the ones who shipwreck their faith.

But Paul and those we read about in Hebrews 11 have shown the way. Through hardships, trials, temptations, persecution and even death, they did not deny their Lord or the faith.

## **The Reward**

Fight the good fight. Finish the race. Keep the faith. Because there is, for those who finish the journey, a great reward. In this passage, Paul calls it the "crown of righteousness." In other places it is called a "crown of life," the "crown of exaltation," the "imperishable crown," or the "crown of glory." It will be given to us by Christ, the righteous Judge who cannot be deceived. In this world, we often experience injustice, but when we face Christ, justice will prevail and those who have finished the course will receive their crown based on the righteousness of their Savior. Whatever the nature of the crown, the greatest reward will be to see Jesus face-to-face and to hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

## **Remembering those Who Have Died**

We are here this morning to proclaim the truth of eternal life in Jesus Christ, to celebrate those who have died in the faith, and to be encouraged by their testimony. They are the ones who are alive in Christ's presence, even though their mortal bodies have perished. They are part of heaven's grandstand, and they are leaning over the banister, cheering us on.

Today we celebrate the lives of five from our congregation who have fought the good fight. They have finished the race. They have kept the faith. I have asked a representative from their family or a friend who knew them well to light a candle from the center candle (which represents Christ) to remind us that they are as surely alive in Christ's presence as they were when they were with us.

Leonard Aho – Darlene Aho

*And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.'*

Matthew 22:31-32

Marvine Fredrickson – Elma Delzer

*You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

Psalms 16:10-11

Jon Kendall – Knute Reiersen

*For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.'*

John 6:40

Bettie Linder – Patricia Davies

[Jesus said,] *Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.*

John 5:24

Ruth Van Veldhuizen – Don Van Veldhuizen

*Jesus said..., "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.*

John 11:25-26