**Sermon 9/29/19**

**Hebrews 11:17-12:3**

Two gas company service men, a senior training Supervisor, and a young trainee,

          were out checking and reading meters.

They parked their truck at the end of the street and worked their way

          from one end to the other.

At the last house, a woman was looking out her kitchen window and

          watched the two men as they checked her gas meter.

When they finished, the older supervisor challenged his younger co-worker

          to a foot race back down the street to the truck.

The loser had to buy lunch.

The two men started running as fast as they could to the truck,

          each hoping to earn a free lunch.

Halfway down the street, they heard someone running behind them.

The supervisor looked back over his shoulder and saw the woman

          from the last house huffing and puffing right behind them.

They both stopped and asked her what was wrong.

Gasping for breath she said,

          "When I saw two men from the gas company,

          running full speed away from my house,

          I figured I better run too."

This lady ran with every bit of strength and endurance she had.

She ran because she believed it was important to run,

          her life depended on getting away from her house.

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Paul proclaimed often in his letters, "I have kept the faith. I have finished the race."

This woman also intended to keep on running until she finished the race.

The book of Hebrews is a letter written to encourage new Christians in their faith.

At that time new converts were being thrown out of Jewish temples,

          tossed into jail, tortured, and even put to death.

Hebrews holds up Jesus, who endured great suffering for our sakes,

            as the ultimate example.

The faith described in Hebrews is not sugar-coated.

God does not guarantee a life of luxury and ease.

It is tough faith, a constant commitment to hang on and believe God,

          against all odds, no matter what.

It is a book about perseverance, and endurance, and trust in God.

It is about keeping the faith, finishing the race, whatever the hardships, and difficulties,

and problems, and doubts.

The High School had a good, but not a winning, track team.

One year they got a new Coach.

Before each practice the Coach would give a short talk on strategy and tactics

          for their next track meet.

At first, the boys were all bored almost to tears with these talks.

But as the season progressed, they realized how valuable his planning was.

Each week the Coach sent a scout out to review the next team

          they would be facing.

The scout would come back with various recommendations,

           from what were the best lanes on the track to use,

          what size spikes they should wear on their shoes,

          to how long the guy who started each race paused

                   before shooting the starting gun.

The Relay Sprint Team was good, but they just couldn't beat the other teams.

They were always close but never the winners.

In a relay, a baton was passed off from one runner to the next.

During the handoff, the runner in front who receives the baton does not look back.

So the runner behind him yells out something

          so the one in front knows to reach back and grab the baton.

They were allowed to say anything they wished as they were handing off the baton.

Most teams would call out the name of the runner in front of them,

           like, "Jack," or "Randy" and then Jack or Randy would reach back

           and take the baton.

Some teams would use the name of their school, such as "West Side High,"

          or "Diamond High."

Well, it was the end of the season and the Relay Sprint Team had reached

          the regional finals.

But they were up against teams that were very fast.

They knew they had no chance at the championship, no chance at all.

The coach was well aware of this, so he called them all together

           for a strategy and tactic meeting.

He told them they were no longer going to call out the name of the school.

They were going to use a new word, a secret word

Each practice they spent time handing off the baton while yelling this new word.

The day of the Finals arrived and the team took their places.

The gun sounded and the runners were off.

The last runner for the final leg of the race watched with growing disappointment

          as their team fell farther and farther behind with each handoff.

Although they were in last place, all the runners were very close to each other.

No team had pulled very far ahead of another team.

Finally, it was his turn.

He started running, and his teammate Mike came up behind him.

As Mile handed off the baton, he shouted out the secret word.

With all authority he could muster, Mike shouted, "STOP!"

The final runner reached back, grabbed the baton, focused on the finish line,

          and ran with every bit of strength and speed he had.

He crossed the finish line minutes later – all alone.

Each of the other teams, had done exactly as Mike had shouted.

They all stopped.

They stopped, but who told them to stop?

It was their opponents who cried "Stop!"

They ought to have been more focused on the race, rather on their opponent.

When we trust God, we don't have to listen to those who tell us to stop.

We don't have to listen to those who tell us:

It can't be done.

We don't have enough strength, or money, or time, or people, to make a difference.

Having faith in God we can keep on going

           even when it seems we can't change things.

When we listen to Jesus, we don't have to listen to others.

We find the strength to keep on going, to finish the race.

God has a plan.

His plan has been unfolding since the beginning of time.

He invites us to be a part of his plan.

When we listen to him, instead of those who criticize,

          We become a very real and important part of his plan.

It happened at the Sydney Olympics Games.

By special invitation of the International Olympic Committee,

          under a special program which permits poorer countries to participate,

          even though their athletes do not meet customary standards,

          Eric Moussambani of Equatorial Guinea,

          was entered in the 100-meter men's free style swimming qualifying heat.

The 22-year-old African had learned to swim less than a year before.

He had only practiced in a 20-meter pool, without lane markers,

           and had never raced more than 50 meters.

Incredibly, the other two swimmers in his heat

          were both disqualified because of false starts.

So Moussambani was forced to swim alone.

Eric was, to use the words of an Associated Press story

            about his swimming race, "charmingly inept."

He never put his head under the water's surface.

He flailed wildly to stay afloat.

With ten meters left to the wall, he virtually came to a stop.

He struggled to catch his breath without swallowing more water.

To the spectators, it appeared he might drown.

The rescue team lined up at the edge of the pool,

          ready to dive in and save the swimmer, if necessary.

He was not going to make it to the finish line.

But one of his disqualified opponents stepped to the edge of the pool,

          and called out, "Swim! Swim, Eric! You can do it!"

Then his other opponent joined in, " Swim, Eric, Swim!'

Thrashing wildly to stay afloat, Eric looked back at the two swimmers.

A few spectators stood and joined in the chant: "Swim. Eric. You can do it!"

Then more were on their feet, calling to him, and then more,

          until the whole stadium was cheering him on.

After what seemed like an eternity, the African turned and looked

          at the end of the pool.

Struggling, obviously exhausted, he thrashed and flailed wildly.

When he finally reached the wall, he hung on for dear life.

When he had caught his breath and regained his composure,

           the French-speaking Moussambani said through an interpreter,

          "I want to send hugs and kisses to the crowd.

          It was their cheering that kept me going.

          Without them cheering me on, I could not have finished.

          I thank each and every one of you."

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses,

            let us throw off everything that hinders,

           and the sin that so easily entangles,

           and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

We are encouraged by a great cloud of witnesses.

We are the witnesses who encourage others.

Surround by so great a cloud of witnesses,

           we can find the strength and endurance to keep on going,

                    and to make a difference.

AMEN