

## All Saints' 2024

Mount Snowdon is the highest mountain in Wales and the highest peak in the British Isles south of the Scottish Highlands.

It's not an easy climb, though it starts off rather benignly. More than that, it has its share of danger, as an average of eight people die each year on its traitorous slopes.

Once a friend and I set off to scale its majestic heights. At first the weather was a manageable mist, but as we got higher and higher that mist turned to a driving rain.

Determined to carry on, we continued to climb over rocks even after the trail disappeared . . . that is, until we were advised by those coming down that there were gale-force winds at the top.

At this point, only about 100 feet from the peak, we wimped out.

Followers of Jesus, almost from the beginning of the Christian Church, have faced reoccurring periods of gale-force winds . . . winds of challenge and persecution.

More than that, there have always been voices out there, in good times and bad, saying, “Turn back. Play it safe.”

More than a few have heeded these voices. The technical word for this is **apostacy**.

Persecution is the backdrop of the Epistle to the Hebrews. The message of this letter can be summarized in two words: ‘carry on’.

A little hymn from India captures its message beautifully:

*The world behind me, the cross before me;  
the world behind me, the cross before me,  
the world behind me, the cross before me;  
no turning back, no turning back.*

A key moment in Hebrews comes at the beginning of Chapter 12 where we find the writer giving this exhortation:

**“Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith . . .”**

If you think about it, these two verses perfectly summarize the message of the feast we are celebrating today, All Saints’.

The imagery here is not ascending a mountain. Rather, it is running a race. Both,

however, work, as we think about carry on to the end, finishing well.

Let me pause here to ask, “Have you ever felt like throwing in the towel or at least sitting down and resting in terms of your Christian endeavor?”

At some point in the past, perhaps when you were confirmed or joined the church, you were in earnest about the things of God. You were gung-ho about following Jesus, about reading the Bible, about saying your prayers, serving wherever you were needed, about being the best Churchman possible.

Yet, over the years your enthusiasm has waned. Other things have taken your focus. Being in the Lord’s house on the Lord’s Day is no longer as vital as it once was. Giving that the Kingdom of God may be extended is no longer of first importance.

If so, this passage is for you; indeed, it is for all of us. It reminds us that there is a race to be run, and that this race is not always easy. It demands dogged endurance and steady focus.

Very helpfully we find in these verses three pointers for staying in the race.

The first pointer is to **look back** . . . back to those who have endured the storms of life and have not succumbed to them. Let these folk encourage you to carry on.

If we had read the chapter preceding the two verses I have just quoted, we should have found a list of 70+ people who stayed in the race and finished well.

The writer of Hebrews holds them up as examples and encouragements to his readers.

If you opened this week's e-newsletter – This Week at St. Luke's – you saw a picture of

the dome of Hodges Chapel at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama. Around this dome are depictions of saints from all ages.

We too are **“surround by so great a cloud of witnesses.”**

These greats from the past encourage us to **run with patience the race that is set before us.** “Patience,” means ‘endurance’ . . . staying strong and not wimping out. ///

And so, our first pointer in this passage is to look back to those who have gone before and to be encouraged by their example. A second is to **get rid of excess baggage.**

**“Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us.”**

Sins with a capital ‘S’ certainly slow us down, but they are not alone. Even good things

when misused, when turned into little gods, can do the same.

Have you ever tried to lug several heavy suitcases through an airport or train station? If you have, you know what excess weight can do.

Last week, I was talking to a man whose wife is on hospice. I asked him if they had a local church?

He shook his head sadly, and said, **“We were brought up in the church and once attended, but eventually we stopped.”**

A host of good things intervened.

He went on to tell about all they had done in their 70 years of marriage. None of the things he mentioned were bad. They were positively good. He made a lot of money, and they lived well. Their house was tastefully decorated with art and antiques.

Nevertheless, these good things had taken their focus off the things of God. They had become chains and weights. He now wished things had been different.

What about you? What about me? Do we need to reorder our priorities, shed some suitcases?

A little quip from the past goes like this:  
**Either Jesus is Lord of all, or He is not lord at all.”**

Resolve to make Him boss of every aspect of life from this day forward.

Jimmy Carter prior to his bid for the presidency wrote a book entitled “Why Not the Best.” That’s what we are aiming for. ///

We’ve looked at two pointers for staying on course: We need to look back and learn from the

saint of the past, AND we need to empty our suitcases of excess weight.

But we are given a third pointer as well. We are to **keep our eyes focused ahead, ahead on Jesus and finish line.**

I am told that those who compete in athletic competitions do well not to pay attention to those who compete alongside them. Rather, they are to look straight ahead to the finish line.

This seems to be what the author of Hebrews is saying we are to do. We are to keep our eyes on the One he calls the “author and finisher of our faith.”

Human heroes are important, but there is only one who is worth setting our ultimate sights on, and that is Jesus.

He is our forerunner. He finished the race before us and received the crown. Philippians 2 says: “God hath highly exalted him . . .”

What is true of Jesus is true of His believing people, those united to Him in faith and baptism. They too will receive a crown of glory if they carry on to the finish line. They too will be raised to life everlasting. They too will receive blessing and honor. /// That can be you.

In closing, staying on the trail, staying in the race, is what makes a saint a saint.

Aim at nothing less.

“They lived not only in ages past . . . and I want to be one too.”

