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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Jeremiah 23:23–29, Psalm 82, Hebrews 11:29–12:2, Luke 12:49–56
Worthy of This World

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let's continue to look at Hebrews Chapter 11, about the "Heroes of Faith." We began our study of this great chapter last week by noticing that it is characteristic of faith that it believes whole-heartedly in things that are "unseen." Therefore faith calls for a noble soul that relaxes its grip on this present world and lives for heaven and heaven's Lord Jesus, and *in the process* proves a blessing for our world.

Now I want to lift up another idea from Hebrews 11. It is the apostle's striking praise for the heroes of faith who had suffered:

³⁷They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— ³⁸*of whom the world was not worthy.* (Hebrews 11:37-38, NRSV)

There are brutal images in this passage, and so I must emphasize immediately that we do not need to be stoned to death or to be killed by the sword in order to live a life worthy of this world. It is not the violence of our end, but our calm daily loyalty to Jesus that makes for a good life — a life worthy of this world.

Still, it could well cause us to shudder to realize that the cruel deaths spoken of in our text are not restricted to fiction and the imagination, but have really happened in this world. If scholars are right that the Epistle to the Hebrews was written to strengthen the faith of early Jewish Christians in Rome, well, Carol and I have visited Rome. We have visited the ancient Coliseum. We have beheld the maze of tunnels dug under the Coliseum floor through which wild animals were moved and from which they would spring forward through trap doors to slay Christians and other poor souls. Judging by the television series *The Tudors*, the sawing of human beings in half was not restricted just to the ancient days of the church, but extended even to Reformation times. And perhaps no century was as cruel as the twentieth century in which many of us were born, with the holocaust of the Jews and Stalin's slave labor camps and his executions by the millions. The horrors that humans can inflict on one another are appalling.

So, there are brutal images in this morning's text from Hebrews, true, but it is the last phrase in our text that fascinates me and moves me: "of whom the

world was not worthy.” I want to linger with this phrase. Using two images from popular culture, I want to explore two sides of this idea about the world and being worthy of the world. First, I want to lift up the idea that it is possible to live in such a way that we *are* worthy of this world, that we are not a burden on this world or an offense to the world but a blessing. It is possible for us to live such a life that the world could say of us, “He was not so bad. She was okay. They lived worthy lives.” For this theme, I mean to refer to a Clint Eastwood movie.

My other theme goes the other way round. It is not so much about *us* as about the *world* in which we live. Here I want to say that, by God’s grace, we live in a good world — a world where goodness will win out in the end, a world worthy of faithful lives. If we were to put the world on the witness stand and compel it to give answer for itself, I think that our world could rightly answer, “It is true that there is a lot of trouble and sorrow in me. And yet, all things considered, I am a world worthy of human beings. Aye, I am a world worthy of the best efforts of humanity. Indeed, I am worthy of lives of faith.” For this theme, I mean to refer to a Peanuts cartoon.

CLINT EASTWOOD

So, let’s begin. My first theme is that it is possible for us to live lives worthy of our world. For this theme, I begin with a passing scene in the Clint Eastwood movie *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976). I bet that sometime during the past two decades I have already talked about this scene, it so pleases me.

The scene is a kind of funeral prayer. It is the end of the Civil War. Josey Wales and a young friend are being pursued by Union militia and bounty hunters. The young friend has been shot and dies. Josey Wales, played by Clint Eastwood, hauls the dead young man onto a horse, ties the dead body in place, smacks the horse and sends him running through the militia camp, serving as a diversion so that Josey Wales can escape. But before Wales smacks the horse and sends him flying, he says a prayer for the young man. It goes this way:

This boy was brought up in a time of blood and dying and never questioned a bit of it. He never turned his back on his folks or his kind. I rode with him... and I got no complaints.¹

Man! If Clint Eastwood could say that about me at the end of my days, I think that would be pretty good. “I rode with him... and I got no complaints.”

¹ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0075029/quotes>

More than that, I would like this old world of ours to say a similar thing: He lived among us, and we have no complaints.

Most of all, I want *Jesus* to be able to say that of me. His is the praise I most desire. All of those kinds of sorrows and suffering spoken of in our Hebrews text were combined in him, the “man of sorrow,” and yet he always held true. He was born into rough circumstances and died on a cross. He was dismissed as being mad and condemned as performing miracles by way of Satan. He was homeless, with nowhere to lay his head. He was dismissed by most, misunderstood even by his disciples, plotted against by powerful enemies, denied by a friend, betrayed by another, abandoned in his hour of need, and tortured to death via crucifixion. But through all that, he remained constant — a man of love, fighting for you and me that we might have hope of eternal life. *His* praise is the one I really want. It would mean a lot to me if someday I could hear him say:

Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. (Matthew 25:21, KJV)

Sometimes we live as if we owe the world nothing. We become so preoccupied with our own concerns that we imagine that it is none of the business of the universe how we live. But the apostle in today’s reading could point to ordinary people who had lived their lives so well, that he could say that they had lived worthily—indeed, that the world was unworthy of them! That’s how I would like us to live, with something of that spirit.

LINUS AND HIS OLDER SISTER LUCY

My other theme goes the other way around. Before I was urging us to live lives worthy of our world. Now I want to say that the world is a worthwhile place to live in. It is deserving of our best.

Let me begin developing this theme by referring to a Peanuts cartoon from long ago. It is nighttime. Good ole Charlie Brown sees Linus walking in the nighttime with a candle lit and shining. Charlie Brown asks Linus, “What’s this?” Linus—that natural-born philosopher—answers,

I have heard that it is better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness.

In the next panel, Charlie Brown answers,

That's true. Although there will always be those who will disagree with you.

And in the last panel you see Linus's crabby sister Lucy, standing there in the darkness, shouting out to the universe, "You stupid darkness!"

But I want to speak up on behalf of the universe, even a universe that has lots of darkness in it. What we need to avoid — in our words, but even more in our conduct — is to avoid cursing the world. We do not need to think or to say or to believe in our heart of hearts that this is a bad world, that we human beings are born into a miserable world, and that there is nothing here worth fighting for.

No, Christians are not a downhearted or cynical people. If Jesus were not risen, maybe a calm evaluation of things would lead to the conclusion that this world is a pretty awful place. But Jesus *is* risen. And that changes everything. In face of our Lord's resurrection, all setbacks are temporary. Indeed, they are better than temporary: they are building blocks that our God is using to craft our characters and to bring in his kingdom. Why, even death is no death, but rather a journey to a better shore.

If the fate of the earth is to collide with some asteroid, or to collapse into some star, or for the whole universe to explode or to contract into a black hole or something else grim like that, then grab what you can while you can. Sit back like that man with his barns and "eat, drink and be merry" and wait for death to catch up with you and for the final curtain to fall.

But if Jesus is alive and afoot in the world, then the destiny of this world is something different from that, and better. Much better.

LAYING ASIDE EVERY WEIGHT

If Jesus is alive and afoot, then, it is rational and wholesome for us to take up the concluding exhortation in today's text, and make it our own. Let me read that famous exhortation for you again:

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith... (Hebrews 12:1-2, NRSV)

We have athletic imagery here, and I am not an athlete. But I have watched my wife, Carol, over the years and I think I have learned some things from her about this matter of "laying aside every weight" and running "with perseverance the race that is set before us."

In fact, let me borrow a couple paragraphs from Carol's sermon for this morning. Up there at the Wartburg, Carol begins her discussion about "running with perseverance the race that is set before us" by talking about the holy habit of coming to church, as you good folks before me have done. Carol says this:

It takes discipline to develop the habit of going to church every Sunday. After a while we don't even think about it, but there was a time when we made the choice and disciplined ourselves to stick with it. It's that same way with an exercise practice or following a diet – it takes self-discipline and a commitment to stick to it. Maybe, after a while it becomes a habit and it is not so hard to follow as it was in the beginning.

So, following Jesus in this way takes discipline and commitment. Just like training for running a race or becoming a musician or developing a career. There are choices that must be made if we want to be successful. Some things help us in our training, but other things are distractions and set us back. If you want to run a marathon, for example, you must spend an adequate amount of time training for it. That means you have less time available to go to movies with friends or do other things that you enjoy doing. You may also have to forgo some of your favorite foods and drinks for the sake of your training. You must set those things aside for a while, at least until you have accomplished your goal.

According to Hebrews, following Jesus is much the same. Some things help us but other things hinder us and drag us down. The writer of Hebrews says that we must, "lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely," so that we may, "run with perseverance the race that is set before us..."

I think Carol is right about this. The good race of faith takes discipline and practice and repetition of healthy choices, over and over again, just like training for a race.

I close, then, with this simple idea: Our world is worthy of such discipline. There are people we love in this world, and we ourselves live in this world, and above all, Jesus died for this world and lives and loves it still. So, this world is worthy that we should use these days granted to us to be fighting on the right side, on the good side, on the side of love and peace, piety and virtue. In one

respect, then, each of us can try to be athlete: we can practice the disciplines, the choosing and the forgoing that are appropriate for Christian piety. In general, if Jesus is alive and afoot, then let us *enjoy* more the ride, contributing our strength to causes that will not fail in the end, laying up treasure for ourselves not just on earth, but even more in heaven, and following along behind him who is the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith” — even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.