

"THE SECRET OF DURABILITY"

A Sermon

By

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## "THE SECRET OF DURABILITY"

TEXT: "Therefore...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our Faith..."  
(Hebrews 12, 12 and 2)

INTRODUCTION Botanically speaking, a morning glory is a twining plant having heart-shaped leaves and funnel-shaped flowers of various colors. In colloquial speech, however, the term "morning glory" is applied to one who started well in some given endeavor but failed to finish. It's one thing to get off the mark, and something else again to cross the finish line. Even if it takes four hours or more, there are those who are running today who will say tomorrow, "I made it...took me a long time, but I finished. I finished!"

DEVELOPMENT The durability of faith has been a concern of the Church from earliest times. All who set out to live in obedience to Christ do not sustain that intention. Every congregation has a list of inactive members...by whatever name. While it is more hopeful to focus on the front door where people enter, we dare not overlook the back door where people leave. The problem of lapsed members, of expired faith and battle fatigue is real and sizeable in most churches.

Theologians have wrestled with this problem under the general title, "The Perseverance of the Saints". There is one school that insists that a genuinely converted person can never fall way, "Once saved, always saved". And did not Jesus say, "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow Me; and I give them eternal life; and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand". (John 10: 27 - 28)

The other school insists that even the best of starts does not guarantee fidelity. I think Jesus recognized this. It's to be remembered that after Jesus gathered His disciples about Him and prepared to send them out for the first time, He described the forms and degrees of opposition that they would encounter and He then went on to say, "But he who endures...who endures to the end will be saved." (Matthew 10: 22).

However we go at this question theologically, we eventually come to something of an impasse. One camp will say, "Yes, it is possible to have living faith and to lose it". The other camp will reply, "If you lose it, it shows that you never really had the real thing in the first place."

But I think the issue as a theological question really doesn't grab us anymore. We're not as intent as our fathers might have been to distinguish the sheep from the goats. Most of us are willing to leave ultimate determinations to God, or we should be willing. We're coming to see that Augustine was right when he said:

"Many are of God who are not of the Church, and many are of the Church who are not of God."

Yet, even though we may not go at it theologically, or with the same intensity of our fathers, this issue of lapsed faith and defective commitment is with us still. We all know people who were once a vital part of the Christian enterprise but who

no longer walk with us. Indeed, in our more reflective moments we know that our pilgrimage as Christians is a matter of fits and starts. We have our highs and our lows. We know seasons of reassuring confidence and high trust, but we also know those periods when the claims of the unseen world seem like nothing more than a piously contrived fiction.

Mu and Nu are the middle letters of the Greek alphabet. One of the weaknesses that infects the Church today might well be called the "Mu-Nu" virus. We start out well and we intend to finish well, but we have a way of sagging during the race...during those middle years. Perhaps this is what the Psalmist had in mind when he spoke of "the destruction that wasteth at noonday". (Psalm 91: 6)

EXAMPLE OF MOSES In the belief that example is always more profitable than all the words of exhortation, I want us to look together briefly at a man of faith who stayed with his calling all the way through to the end. You may have surmised from the morning scripture that his name was Moses. Moses the liberator.

Now this man's track record through life is summarized in Hebrews XI. And virtually all that Moses represented is gathered under three strong verbs. First, "Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter". This was an earth-shaking refusal. You'll recall that Moses had been raised in Pharaoh's court where he was exposed to the luxury and finery of the greatest civilization of that time. Before him was a life of ease and power and freedom. But Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter because he sensed a higher calling. He had an identity as a son of faith.

Secondly, "He chose to suffer affliction with the people of God, rather than to enjoy the pleasure of sin for a season." People of God. And what brave optimism this was, for his people were the afflicted and much oppressed slaves of the Egyptian empire. Somehow Moses believed that the future of God lay with those oppressed people and not with the might and power of Egypt. First, he refused and second, he chose.

But what assured Moses' place in faith's Hall of Fame is the next verb. Moses, we go on to read, "endured". He endured. If he had not endured we would not have known that he had refused to be called the Son of Pharaoh's daughter, or that he had chosen to identify himself with the people of God. Moses endured - despite occasional misgivings about his own abilities, despite interminable hassles that taxed his diplomatic skills on the wilderness march, despite severe and repeated testings of his own faith, he saw a tough and demanding business through to the end. He crossed the finish line. And he did it, we are told, "As seeing Him who is invisible". And this, I take it, is the secret of durability. "The seeing of Him who is invisible".

NOT ON HIS PEERS We might comment negatively that the durability of Moses' splendid faith did not in any way depend upon or rise from his peers. It is true that faith can never be an altogether solitary experience, and that God sets us in the fellowship of faith that we call the Church. But I do not believe that our associations with other Christians is the primary source of durability.

Let's be frank about it and admit that others do not always induce faith in us, nor do we always induce faith in them. Those who share a particular fellow-

ship with us can often be depressingly disappointing, just as we in our own poor way can be depressingly disappointing to them.

NOR ON TEMPORAL FORTUNE

Again, commenting negatively on Moses' experience, we can affirm that faith does not rest on temporal fortune or conditions. Moses' circumstances, for the most part, were hardly conducive to faith. We must be careful not to attach our fidelity to God to that or any other temporal condition. Faith is not determined by the Dow Jones average, nor by the current mood of the UN, or the wisdom or lack of wisdom of the powers of the world. We are affected by such conditions, but we are not determined by them.

It is an easy thing for Christian people to imagine how faithful they would be in other times or places. If we could live in different surroundings how strong would be our faith. I've often thought how much fun it would have been to be a minister of the Faith back in the days of the great cathedrals of Europe during the middle ages, when the Church dominated all of a town.

I recall hearing a story some time back about two Texans who stood for the first time in front of Niagara Falls. One turned to the other and said, "Well.. JR...what do you think of it?" He replied with that drawl, "Heck, it's all right, but I know a creek back in Texas that could do it if it had a place."

I have a friend from seminary days who chose to spend his years ministering to people in the small towns of Maine who keeps on his desk a little card that reads, "Bloom where you are planted".

We need to remember that durability does not rise from temporal conditions or immediate surroundings. Faith is tied to something bigger. It comes from "seeing Him who is invisible". To turn it around, let me say that the secret of durability of faith is one's personal experience of God through Jesus Christ.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

"The Lord spoke unto Moses face to face as a man speaketh to his friend". This secret holds for us today. This is what got us started in the Christian life, and this is what keeps us at it, running along...our own personal experience of God.

At times, let's face it, church membership can be a bit of a wilderness journey - from one committee meeting to the next, from one board meeting to the next, from one budget meeting to the next, from canvass to canvass, cause to cause, promotion to promotion. In some instances the administrative year and the organizational year of the Church can stifle the hungers of the heart for God.

It is also to the point to note that our witness in the world can take its toil. We can come down with a severe case of battle fatigue. Many of you have read the book or seen the movie, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. You will recall that the heroic Christ-figure in that story is a man by the name of McMurphy who struggles to overcome the structured evil of a mental institution. The author, Ken Kesey, writes:

"....the thing he was fighting for you couldn't whip for good. All you could do was keep on whipping it till you couldn't come out anymore and somebody else had to take your place."

DOUBT / DEFICIENCY DISEASE

Doubt is fundamentally a deficiency disease. It comes from leaving something out of one's life. I think it stems from a failure to maintain the inner life - perhaps in the interest of being relevant, timely, and with it.

slowly - through

God dies in our doubting - not by denial but by inattention. The vision must be maintained and reinforced. That's how it was with Moses. You can almost hear his mother's voice whispering in his ear as she raised him in the court of Pharaoh, "You belong to something more than this." And Moses saw that he did. God affirmed Himself again to Moses in the luminous burning bush. He spoke yet another time in the thunder of Sinai. He communed with him day by day in his desert prayers. Those close and intimate moments with God underwrote the actions of his life.

And this is why God gave us the Scriptures, why He gave us the Sacraments, why He gave us the Church, why He gave us each other, why He gives us from time to time those centering moments of life that border on the mysterious.

A couple of questions caught my eye on a church bulletin earlier this week. "Does God seem further away? Which of you has moved?" Moses refused, he chose, he endured. Not because of lateral reinforcement on the run. Not because his circumstances were always hopeful and optimistic. But because he was able to see in the events of every day the very face of God.

I go back from time to time in memory to an experience in my late teens that happened on a Summer church youth camp in Poultney, Vermont...when the invisible God became very real to me. And around a campfire on a college campus under a July sky, I gave as much of this life as I could to as much of God as I understood. That's how it started for me. That first sighting of God helped to anchor my pilgrimage ever since...through college and seminary years, and through 25 years of ministry in this Church and city.

A SUPERMAN THAT SAVES

I don't know how many of you have seen the movie, Superman. I wanted to see it this Summer in Maine, but there were no takers for it in my family. I did get to see it on TV in recent weeks. Because of this I was interested to see what Richard Donner had to say about the problems he had trying to achieve the illusion of flight in Superman. Writing in American Film, he said:

review  
watch  
read

"The first major flying we did with Chris Reeve was in Brooklyn Heights at the East River....we had Chris on a cable coming down from one of those great construction cranes. We were testing and swinging him out over the East River. It was stupid; we took so many chances. But the Teamsters were sitting in their trucks listening to the radio and one of them came running over and said, 'You're not going to believe this. The traffic cop in the copter said, 'Well...I'm coming up East River Drive...traffic is backed up on the drive; you should try the West Side Highway....the East Side...oh, my God... you're not going to believe this, but there's a guy in blue tights and a red cape flying over Brooklyn Heights.' And then we knew it worked."

There are times in our lives when we long for and look for a superman to come and save us. And the one I'm thinking about doesn't wear blue tights and a red

cape. He may not be as spectacular as Superman streaking across the sky. He's not the news-breaker Superman is. But, friend, there is a "Superman" who can come to you and make a difference in your life. He mends broken hearts, broken lives, broken dreams. For centuries He has been saving souls and continues to do so even today. "The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ". There we see Him who is invisible. The secret is out.

CLOSING

"Be of good cheer....the end is near". Frederick Beuchner in his book, The Hungering Dark, tells of having seen the movie La Dolce Vita, in a small New England college town. He recounts how that picture opens with a helicopter flying low over the Italian countryside outside Rome carrying a man-sized statue draped in robes. The citizens look up somewhat entranced as the rare spectacle of a statue swooping this way and that way in harness hanging from a moving helicopter. Now it's over a field; then above a swimming pool on the edge of Rome where people are sun bathing.

In time the camera moves in for a close-up of this statue. For a moment or two the screen is filled with the bearded visage of Christ...for it's a statue of Christ that's in harness hanging from the helicopter. Beuchner recalls that in that instant the theater became quiet. No more laughing, no more munching of popcorn....quietness. He writes:

"For a moment - not very long to be sure - there was no sound, as if the face were their face, somehow, their secret face that they had never seen before but that they knew belonged to them, or the face that they had never seen before but that they knew, if only for a moment, they belonged to".

He then adds: "I think that this is much of what the Christian faith is. It is for a moment, just for a little while, seeing that face and being still - that is all". Therein is the secret of durability, of enduring as you run your race. Therefore,

"Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith".

PRAYER

Grant us, O God, in our worship this day a glimpse of **Your** glory in the face of Jesus Christ, our Lord. May it steady us and strengthen us in the greater marathon of life in which all of us are participants. Looking always to Jesus for peace and power, we would ask this in His glorious name. Amen.