Dead: Struggle Well Memory Verse: Hebrews 12:2

April 2nd, 2023 Scripture Reading: Matthew 16:24-28

TITLE SLIDE

 Welcome as we continue to journey thorough this season of Lent. Welcome as we take seriously or sin, our offenses to God. Welcome as together we employ the spiritual weapons God has provided for our use. Welcome to the struggle. (ROCKY MOVIE CLIP)

SLIDE 2: ROCKY

 Sometimes I think it’s easy for us to think of struggle as a training montage from a movie. Take Rocky for example…I don’t think it matter which one. There is upbeat music to inspire and motivate, there are scenes of someone working hard, pouring sweat and gritting their teeth. As the montage progresses, so does the character. They move more quickly, the weight they can bear increases, they demonstrate dramatic improvement all in the span of a few convenient minutes! By the end, Rocky is a well-oiled machine, ready to take on any opponent. And, of course, that is exactly what happens. Rocky put time and effort into the struggle and so he must come out victorious. That’s how these things work. That’s the story line we write for ourselves. And that’s how we wish it worked in real life. If only we could accomplish what Rocky can accomplish in five minutes. Never mind that that scene in the movie if supposed to represent weeks and weeks of struggle…we want the five-minute version. We want the quick turnaround. Theologian Richard Sibbs writes with Paul in mind when he says, “The gospel has a transforming changing power, into the likeness of Christ…It is a gradual change, not all at once, but from glory to glory, from one degree of grace to another.” Our transformation comes gradually, not all at once…it’s a struggle.

 Nothing worth having in this life comes easy. Struggle is part of the fabric of our existence. Certainly we go through seasons in which we might struggle more or less, but if we are committed to Christ, if we are learning to hate sin, if we are yearning to be holy as God is holy, then all I can say is, welcome to the struggle. The goal of this life is not to avoid struggle as though we find ourselves in some cosmic game of dodgeball, trying to duck and roll out of the way, but rather our goal as Christians is to struggle well. That’s what we see in the life of Jesus.

 Today, we join Jesus while he is at the top of the wave. As he enters Jerusalem, he is basically received as a celebrity. Word got out about this amazing miracle Jesus performed for a friend of his named Lazarus. This man had died and had been dead, but Jesus called him out of his tomb and brought him back to life. Lazarus himself was enjoy in his fifteen minutes of fame as the talk of the whole region. However, not everything was hunky-dory. Trouble lurked just under the surface.

**SLIDE 3: John 12:10**

The apostle John tells us in chapter 12 verse 10 “The chief priests decided that they would kill Lazarus too (meaning, in addition to Jesus.) Why such hatred? Why the determination to kill a man who had already just died? John tells us, “It was because of Lazarus that many of the Jews had deserted them and come to believe in Jesus.” So, the chief priests are losing ground. And the story of Lazarus is too much to compete with, so he needs to be done away with. Their plan was to keep their eyes peeled and their informants close at hand during the Passover Festival and if Jesus showed his face, then they would arrest him and do what needs to be done.

 But the teachers and the Pharisees are about to face their worst fear…everyone loves Jesus!

**SLIDE 4: John 12:12-19 The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him. They shouted, “Hosanna! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessings on the king of Israel!” Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, Don’t be afraid, Daughter Zion. Look! Your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt. His disciples didn’t understand these things at first. After he was glorified, they remembered that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him. The crowd who had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead were testifying about him. That’s why the crowd came to meet him, because they had heard about this miraculous sign that he had done. Therefore, the Pharisees said to each other, “See! You’ve accomplished nothing! Look! The whole world is following him!”**

John reports. READ 12-19. You can hear the panic in the voice of the Pharisees…”The whole world is following him! Noooooo!” But we don’t want to miss what happens next. Jesus does not spend the day signing autographs or doing interviews. We read on: READ 20-28.

**SLIDE 5: John 12:20-28 Some Greeks were among those who had come up to worship at the festival. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and made a request: “Sir, we want to see Jesus.” Philip told Andrew, and Andrew and Philip told Jesus. Jesus replied, “The time has come for the Human One[e] to be glorified. I assure you that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it can only be a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their lives will lose them, and those who hate their lives in this world will keep them forever. Whoever serves me must follow me. Wherever I am, there my servant will also be. My Father will honor whoever serves me. “Now I am deeply troubled. What should I say? ‘Father, save me from this time’? No, for this is the reason I have come to this time. Father, glorify your name!” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.”**

Jesus enters the city to this uproarious fanfare, these shouts of acclamation and praise: Hosanna! Blessings on the king of Israel. And yet, Jesus knows full well why his is there in Jerusalem. He is not there to make name for himself and ingratiate himself to the crowds, he is not there to go toe to toe with the Pharisees and destroy them in a battle of wits that would be sure to go viral. Jesus is not there to incite a riot or muster an army to take down Rome. No, Jesus is there to glorify his Father. And he will do so through humble obedience. He will do so, not by avoiding struggle but by taking it on with open arms. Jesus quickly trades the celebration of the crowd in Jerusalem for the sobering reality of the struggle that lies before him. And that struggle includes treachery, injustice, humiliation, unbelievable physical pain, blood loss, exhaustion, and the cold shoulder of God himself. Yes, Jesus goes to the cross and is forsaken by his Heavenly Father…he experiences hell, the absence of God.

 These are the things on Jesus’ mind as he rides that colt in through the gates of Jerusalem. These are the things Jesus saw when he looked into the eyes of those excited people. And we sit here and claim to follow this man. We purport to want to be like him. And Jesus doesn’t beat round the bush. He tells us plainly that we need to take up our own cross in order to follow him. That those who lose their lives will find life. Struggle is part of the walk. So, I say we enter into the struggle as Jesus did. I say, we should approach the whole thing just like Jesus did. So how did **Jesus struggle well?**

**SLIDE 6: So how did Jesus struggle well?**

 Hebrews 12 helps us answer that question. The author is encouraging us to run our race faithfully, to get rid of the sin that trips us up, but he gives us some insight into how Jesus was able to enter into his struggle with clear eyes and a fierce determination. Hebrews tells us, “He endured the cross, ignoring the shame, for the sake of the joy that was laid out in front of him. And he sat down at the right side of God’s throne.” Jesus did it all for the sake of joy! That seems weird and counterintuitive. Here we are talking about all of his suffering, and we conclude with joy? That is correct! That is how God works! If we can manage to enter into our struggle with joy, then we have already won the fight!

**SLIDE 7: Hebrews 12:2 “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, faith’s pioneer and perfector. He endured the cross, ignoring the shame, for the sake of the joy that was laid out in front of him, and sat down at the right side of God’s throne.”**

 Let’s look at the whole verse in Hebrews. As we run our race, the author says in verse two, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, faith’s pioneer and perfector. He endured the cross, ignoring the shame, for the sake of the joy that was laid out in front of him, and sat down at the right side of God’s throne.” See we already observed the things that Jesus does, and we see added here what we can do: fix our eyes on Jesus. The apostel Pete learned this lesson when he decided to join Jesus out on the waves of the sea. The man walked on water for a step or two but found that he began to sink quickly…Do you remember why? He took his eyes off of Jesus. He became distracted by the waves, he allowed himself to become fearful. Step #1 for us: Keep our eyes on Jesus. All the other things in our periphery can pass us by. All the other shiny glints that we streak through the background can go on their merry way…we have a Savor to behold. We have a king to adore here. We have One who deserves our rapt attention.

 If you want to see some powerful fixation, just stop by my house and observe my kids in front of the TV. You can stroll into their line of sight and they won’t even take the time to object, they will just lean their head to maintain visual contact with the screen. You can snap your fingers in front of their face and they might blink. When a kid is watching TV, the world is dead to them. Oh may that be true of us! May we be so fixed on Jesus our Lord that in fact we die to the distractions of this world.

 Hebrews goes on. In addition to keeping fixed on Jesus, it says in verse three, “Think about the one who endured such opposition from sinners so that you won’t be discouraged and you won’t give up. In your struggle against sin, you haven’t resisted yet to the point of shedding blood and you have forgotten the encouragement that addresses you as sons and daughters. Then the writer goes back and quotes from Proverbs chapter 3: *My child don’t make light of the Lord’s discipline or give up when you are corrected by him, because the Lord disciplines whomever he loves, and he punishes every son or daughter whom he accepts.”*

**Slide 7: Proverbs 3**

We focus our eyes on Jesus and we keep our minds thinking about what he did for us. We follow Jesus, we take up our cross, but we will never bear the sin of the world. We will never endure the turning away of God the Father. We will never have to experience that hell of the absence of God. In fact, the writer says, we have not even had to shed our own blood…yet. His point is, the way has been paved by Jesus. We enter into struggle, we fight against our sinful flesh, we endure hardships but because of Jesus we can do so with joy.

**SLIDE 8: James “to the twelve tribes who are scattered outside the land of Israel.”**

**“My brothers and sisters, think of the various tests you encounter as occasions for joy.”**

**“After all, you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. Let this endurance complete its work so that you may be fully mature, complete and lacking in nothing.”**

The very next book, James, begins his letter with the same message. James writes in verse 2: “My brothers and sisters, think of the various tests you encounter as occasions for joy.” Let’s just carefully think about that for a moment. When is that last time any of us have rejoiced at the occurrence of a test? We dread tests. Tests are difficult. The whole point of a test, be it chemistry, or medical or physical or spiritual, is to see what your made of. What do you know? How do you withstand some resistance? And if we take a glance at verse one, we can see that James is not writing his letter to affluent, suburbanite Minnesotans. He says, “to the twelve tribes who are scattered outside the land of Israel.” So his audience is already displaced and marginalized. James is speaking directly to people who are not having an easy go of it. They are already struggling and James says, I see your struggle and I say, rejoice! You are being tested! It’s a good thing, because James continues in verse 3, “After all, you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. Let this endurance complete its work so that you may be fully mature, complete and lacking in nothing.” In this struggle, we are moving on towards holiness, perfection. That does not come cheap! It is a struggle, a testing, it’s difficult, but it is good. It is good enough that we can actually rejoice in the midst of our testing. Basically, we have to go through the montage if we want to end up with the victory. Jesus had go through the testing. Jesus endured…so must we.

 As with any test however, there is the possibility of failure. We can’t always ace every one. And even then, even in those times where we find ourselves lying flat on our faces after a major fall, those times where we just want to hide in shame because of our failure, those times when we are working so hard but we don’t seem to have any results…friends, rejoice! You are learning endurance. You are being refined. And if you are in that place of frustration, you may hear those words and think, well that’s a nice thought and all, but it doesn’t do anything to actually help me. Why would you want to meet someone in their misery and then just tell them to rejoice? That just ignores everything that person is going through. That is a fair critique, but only if we are focusing on the person who is struggling. But we are not focusing on the person or even the struggle – we are fixed on Jesus. Once we take our eyes off of ourselves, and once we fix them on to Jesus, once we behold his great love and sacrifice, once we see our own trial for what it is, we can indeed rejoice and we will find that we can struggle well.

**SLIDE 9: “Jesus’ loving-kindness makes resisting and mortifying sin a happy work.”**

 Pastor Rush Witt writes, “Jesus’ loving-kindness makes resisting and mortifying sin a happy work.” We no longer have to hide our sin or try to minimize it. We no longer have to live in paranoid fear of our sin. When we remain fixed on Jesus, when we are mindful of his sacrifice, we find the freedom to look our sin in the face and then, in joy, we drag that sin into the light of his forgiveness. It’s a happy work, because the result is so beneficial: holiness.

 I want to close with the lyrics to a song called Childbodybride…this title highlights three different ways scripture speaks about us in reference to God…we are his children, we are Christ’s body, we are his bride.

**SLIDE 10: “Now in my Father’s land, there are no lesser men Nobody barely wins or only just gets in, ‘cause Jesus never fell in love With open eyes he went directly to the cross. He knew exactly what I cost and he still went. When I finally arrive, and my body glides me home Jesus, who once bore my shame, adorned in majesty on His throne I will stand and belong wearing his righteousness as my cloak.”**

The chorus goes like this:

“Now in my Father’s land, there are no lesser men

Nobody barely wins or only just gets in, ‘cause Jesus never fell in love

With open eyes he went directly to the cross. He knew exactly what I cost and he still went.

When I finally arrive, and my body glides me home

Jesus, who once bore my shame, adorned in majesty on His throne

I will stand and belong wearing his righteousness as my cloak.”

We are no longer dead in sin, we are dead to sin and alive in Christ forevermore. May we fix our eyes on the author and perfector of our faith.

Hallelujah! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Amen.