

[OPENING SLIDE]

*"Press On"*

*"Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, **I press on** toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."*

*Gracious Savior, as I am once again given the joyous privilege of proclaiming Your Word, I come before You an empty vessel, seeking to be filled. Today, some of Your people will come seeking to be lifted up by Your grace. What would You have me proclaim? Let these be Your Words, O Lord, not mine. I did not create them, nor do I fill them with the life they would bring, when they are heralded and read. You alone have the Words of eternal life. You alone **are** that Word. Therefore, raise it and Your servant up, so that being by Your Spirit, I might, in turn, fill, encourage and raise those whom You have given me. Let it so, for Jesus' sake; Amen.*

**Introduction**

[SLIDE #2] *"Gaily bedight, a gallant knight, in sunshine and in shadow, had journeyed long, singing a song, in search of Eldorado."*

Such are the opening lines of Edgar Allen Poe's poem of one in search of a Utopian place. Longing for an escape from this world's cares, a knight searches intensely for relief.

He is grossly disappointed.

Whereupon meeting a *"pilgrim shadow,"* inquiring where such a place might be found, this is the best that his guide could offer:

*"Over the Mountains of the Moon, down the Valley of the Shadow, ride, boldly ride," the shade replied, "if you seek Eldorado."*

Whereby, life – truly fulfilled – in Poe's estimation, is, at best, an uncertain and hopeless proposition.

But *not* for the redeemed of the Lord!

Wherein, today, we are bid by our Savior to *"Press on. Press on."* Not as if we had no direction, or were left alone in this mean ole' world ... left to ourselves and to our own devices to make our own way. But rather, in the joy and confidence of knowing that we possess the certainty of certainties – a Savior who not only enjoins us to run the race, but who promises to see us through to its blessed end.

[SLIDE #3] Therefore ...

**Let the redeemed of the Lord, cast the priorities of our lives – and even our very lives themselves – in the Light of Him who died and rose, and will most certainly see us safely home.**

Press on, church! Press on, child of God! Press on.

Amen.

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Ours theme for today's sermon is not an unfamiliar one in Scripture. Consider the aged Solomon, who once wrote [Ecclesiastes 9:11]:

[SLIDE #4]

*"Again I saw that under the sun the **race** is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all."*

Or the prophet Jeremiah [12:5]:

[SLIDE #5]

*"If you have **raced** with men on foot, and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses?"*

[See also Hebrews 12:1-2!]

Paul, again, who at the end of his life, would boldly affirm [1 Timothy 4:7]:

*"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the **race**, I have kept the faith.*

It's a race that, despite its hardships, the apostle thrilled to run. Yes, sixteen times the word "joy," or some variation of it is used in Philippians. What could he be so happy about, even as he sits in and stares out of his prison cell?

That the Philippians had come to believe the Gospel, and were now growing, both in their faith in their Savior, as well as in their lives of faith. ... [A joy] that even though Paul was in prison ... the gospel was having its full effect.

Redeemed of the Lord, it is a joy that is ours also. Yes, since the day of your Baptism, it's been a race for the finish, whereby through faith, worked in you by the Holy Spirit, you have been set on the course ... the race, even now, being run.

[SLIDE #6] "On your mark, get set, go, child of God, go!"

But it's a course not always so easily run, amen?

For me, it's often the little things that get to me most – like little thorns, or like a rock in the shoe. Especially during these last few months, it's the petty little things that have come to distract me the most – that cause me the most annoyance.

What is it for you, child of God? Those things that hinder your run, your desire to "press on" in Christ? Those things that, the writer to the Hebrews says, "so easily entangle and ensnare." Wherein, each and every one of us is running some kind of race this morning. Each and every one of us is *somewhere* ... somewhere on the track ... at some point in the 26.2.

Where the tug of this world, its values and offerings are strong. The goings on of our lives complicate things. We are grieving here. We are laid low. Our friends and family are dying. Our own bodies are aching. Some of us are emotionally overwhelmed to the point of being left for dead, left only to hope, that at some point, we might have strength to get back into the game.<sup>1</sup>

During these times what makes for courage? What makes for strength? What makes for the hope to carry on ... when the temptation to shrink back is ever before us? How to "press on?"

[SLIDE #7] FIRST, come to the starting line in *whatever* state you are in.

*"Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest."*  
[Matthew 11:28]

Wherein, for Paul it was matter of possessing some of the best gifts God could give: an Israelite of Israelites, schooled in the Word of God. For us, it may be different, where we may not be feeling so confident in God's promises. Instead, we come into His house today, as though limping to the starting line, feeling broken, or worn down by what life has thrown us.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther called these "diabolical assaults on our faith and trust in God" ... *anfechtungen*, an otherwise untranslatable word that basically means an "encounter [that] shoots into our totally unsuspecting heart the poisonous arrow of uninhibited desire." They are the terrors and tremors that "bedevil us" when Satan decides to use some opportunity to rob us of the joy we might otherwise have in our Lord. These times are often unannounced, but come on us as sure and certain as the Trojan Paris, who shoots his unsuspecting arrow into the heel of Achilles.

<sup>7</sup>**But whatever gain I had** [or “was to my profit”], **I counted as loss** for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup>**Indeed, I count everything as loss** [“refuse, rubbish, leavings, dirt, dung”<sup>2</sup>] **because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.**<sup>3</sup>

[SLIDE #8] Here, we are brought straight to Jesus ... straight to the One who not only redeems and rescues ... but strengthens and sustains.

*“Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God ... He does not faint or grow weary. ... He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he in-creases strength. ... [So that] they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. [Isaiah 40:28-30]*

“Yes, in whatever condition, whatever dreams lay broken at your feet, whatever your fears, disappointments or failings, lay them at my feet,” says the Lord. “Let me bind up your wounds – pouring on oil and wine!

[SLIDE #9] Wherein, SECONDLY, check all of your “baggage” – your distress, your weariness, your pain and brokenness – at the door of Christ’s righteousness.

Wherein, Paul pens by inspiration of the Spirit ...

*For his sake **I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish**, in order **THAT [we] may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own** that comes from the law, **but that which comes through faith in Christ**, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— **THAT [we] may know Him and the power of His resurrection**, and may share His sufferings, becoming Like Him in His death ... **THAT by any means possible [we] may attain the resurrection from the dead.***

[SLIDE #10] In times like these, I usually turn to music. Where, the playlists on my iPod tell the story: “Carry On” ... “Live Free or Die” ... “U2: Belief.” Yes, the songs tell the story – when I’m laid low ... “Carry on my wayward son” ... “I don’t care about indecision ... all I want is to have my peace of mind.”

<sup>2</sup> BAGD, 758; “In Greek it often refers to things such as a half-eaten corpse, filth, and/or human excrement.” [Abel, CPR, 20:2, 20]

<sup>3</sup> “We should not *misread* vv. 4-6 as a statement of how *wrong* Paul once was. The first four things Paul lists are things not of his choosing, given him by birth, and therefore *by God*.” That these are good gifts, even spiritual advantages, Paul will acknowledge elsewhere [e.g. Rom 3].” [Oschwald, CJ, 39:1, 66]

But in times like these, we need strong medicine. Wherein, for those who possess Christ, or better, who are themselves possessed by *Him*, there is no loss. There is no uncertainty, especially with Him as the final goal, the ultimate prize, lying ever before us. Where, by the far-reaching bounds of His grace, we *can* lay it down, of, if by His gracious will, carry the load.

[SLIDE #11] Wherein THIRDLY, by that same grace we also *take up* our Savior ... even as we rejoice in Him who takes us up into Himself.

Indeed, says the prophet Isaiah [46:4]:

*"I have made you and will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you."*

Wherein, explaining it to his readers, *Boston Globe* writer Art Carey once said, "The real goal of the Boston Marathon is just finishing, just winning the contest with yourself – doing what you have set out to do."

To do just that, to break the tape, to finish well, what will we need to take up?

✠ [SLIDE #12] Is it not a clear vision of Christ?

***<sup>12</sup>Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.***

✠ Is it not a clear vision of the goal?

***<sup>13</sup>Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: **forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup>I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*****

Wherein, what else is it that keeps us "pressing on"? Like a runner, it is ...

✠ [SLIDE #13] Water, hydration = Baptism. As the sign of the cross, was once pressed with water upon your forehead and heart, it *still* marks you as one redeemed by Jesus Christ.

Return to it often. It's the "stream" in which we swim. It's God's solid declaration of who you are. "Press on."

LUTHER: Wash your face; remember your Baptism.

✠ [SLIDE #14] As you follow the Directional Signs, the course clearly marked out in His Word. As the Holy Spirit presses His Word into your ears and heart, sounding forth that enduring song of His forgiveness and grace.

Sit often at Jesus' feet. *Portals of Prayer and Our Daily Bread*. Drink from the well. Set aside time to be with your Savior. Guard it. Keep it. "Press on."

- ✠ [SLIDE #15] Make haste to His Table, to be fed and sustained by His Supper. As your Savior's body and blood are pressed to your lips in the full assurance of your acceptance, your forgiveness and your calling in Him. "Press on."
- ✠ [SLIDE #16] Wherein, finally let us encourage one another. "In the mutual conversation and consolation of your brothers and sisters in Christ" ... *"so great a cloud of witnesses."* [Hebrews 12:1]

There is a reason it's called the Divine Service. It's not just that service He would render unto us, but the service we would render to Him and to each other.

*"Do not give up the habit of meeting together."*

"Press on. Press on."

- ✠ All in and with the assurance of the finish! We've already won! Jesus has given us the means. He alone is our destiny! "Press on. Press on."

### **Conclusion**

[SLIDE #17] At the end of the movie *Gladiator*, Juba symbolically "buries" his friend Maximus, played by Russell Crowe. With a joyous gleam in his eye, he says to his deceased friend: "I will see you again ... but not yet, not yet."

*"Press on, Christian knight, press on!"* Let Jesus be the goal. He most certainly is the prize! It is only He, who, by grace, will see us safely home!

Where by another poem, this one penned by Charles Wesley, we are enjoined and encouraged:

[SLIDE #18]

*Captain of Israel's Host and Guide of all who seek the land above,  
Beneath Thy shadow we abide, the cloud of Thy protecting love;  
Our strength, Thy grace; our rule, Thy Word; our end, the glory of the Lord.*

*Amen.*