

Sermon for Zion, February 18, 2018 – Lent 1, Communion

Scripture: Joshua 1:1-9; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Sermon Title: Going for Gold

*After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying, "My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. From the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, to the Great Sea in the west shall be your territory. No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life.*

*As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go.*

*This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful.*

*I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:1-9 NRSV)*

*Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:24-27)*

You may have noticed by now that the Winter Olympics are in full swing. My favourite events to watch are Bobsled, because of the unbelievable courage involved, and Speed Skating, because of the incredible power, discipline and endurance of the athletes. I watched the incredible 10000 metre race, won by adopted Dutch-Canadian Ted-Jan Bloeman; I'm still looking forward to the bobsledders coming up this week.

I'll never forget the example set by speed skater Catriona Le May Doan, whose heartbreaking fall at the Lillehammer Olympics caused her to reevaluate her life, dedicate herself to God, and skate not for her own glory but in celebration of the gifts and talents with which she had been blessed. As she again recently reflected upon her own Olympic experience in Nagano, her testimony impressed me again. In her own words:

*Prior to the Olympics, everything had been going well. But now I began to notice that not only myself, but a number of top athletes seemed unhappy. So I started looking for answers. I met someone who explained to me who Jesus is-how he could answer my questions and how I could know him on a personal level. Not long after, I asked Jesus to be the biggest part of my life. Turning my life over to God was a difficult thing because it meant that I had to give Him control of my life.*

*Everything in our society is geared towards having more, and that's the way I am, too. I'm determined and stubborn that I will get more by pushing myself. But I found that the more I tried the less happy I was. I learned that life is better when I give everything to God. I know that no matter what I do I'm always loved and everything is going to be okay.*

*Now there's a peace in my life, and I know that Jesus is a part of everything I do, on or off the ice. My focus has changed, knowing that I don't have to worry about results. It really becomes simple. I put in the training and technically I know what to do. Then I just go out and skate as well as I can and leave the rest up to the Lord.*

*That's the attitude I took with me to Nagano, Japan for the 1998 Winter Games. I knew that no matter how well I did, Jesus would be there for me. This time around I skated well, and captured the gold medal in the 500-metre race. Though it was a great win, I know it's my relationship with Jesus that gives me true significance. He loves me, brings joy to my life and gives me peace. With him, my life is truly fulfilling.*

For these current Winter Olympics in Seoul, she is serving as Lead Athlete Mentor for Team Canada. I can't think of a more suitable person for that job. Her protégé, Cindy Klassen, passed on to others what Catriona taught her: *"This is just another race. God knows the outcome. All you can do is use what He's given you. All you can do is do the best you can."*

My interest in Bobsled came after meeting the Vancouver Olympics Canadian sledder Lyndon Rush, who in a CBC interview said, *"My courage comes from my faith, and I don't know any other way of thinking about it. It's engrained in me and I can rely*

*on God and know that He has a plan for me and things are in His control, not mine. That's where my courage comes from. I profess to be a pretty strong Christian. When things are hard, you lean on your faith and a lot of things go better than you would expect.*" I remember watching those bobsled races from Vancouver, and seeing Lyndon pray with his teammates before going down the track. If I were to ever go down a bobsled track, I sure hope someone would pray for me.

There is much shared by these athletes, much they hold in common, from the skiers to the skaters to the bobsledders to the, well, curlers (I suppose); they build on their past triumphs and failures, the setbacks and achievements which line the road to their Olympic moments; they build on what has gone before, and approach each coming event as a clean slate, a new beginning, a fresh set of challenges wherein which anything can happen. Each of them knows that while it is the past which has brought them here, it is the present and the future which counts. And if they give their all, and leave the rest to God, then the outcome is assured.

Joshua and his people were well aware of their past, were all part of what brought them to the edge of the promised land, had spent years in training for just this moment, but were a little iffy about what came next. You see, Moses, the one who had led them out of slavery and through the desert to the very edge of the land promised by God to their ancestor Abraham; well, Moses was no more, and Joshua was now in command. And Joshua, who's not convinced, is getting a pep-talk from God:

*Joshua, I will always be with you and help you as I helped Moses, and no one will ever be able to defeat you. Long ago I promised the ancestors of Israel that I would give this land to their descendants. So be strong and brave! Be careful to do everything my servant Moses taught you. Never stop reading The Book of the Law he gave you. Day and night you must think about what it says. If you obey it completely, you and Israel will be able to take this land. I've commanded you to be strong and brave. Don't ever be afraid or discouraged! I am the Lord your God, and I will be there to help you wherever you go.*

It is a wonderful speech, and Joshua passes it on to his people, but soon we get the idea that although Joshua believes it, every word of it, he believes it in theory. In practice, what he does is send a couple of spies over for a good look around, before anybody makes a hasty move. After all, God has been with us in the past, is with us now, but as far as tomorrow goes, well, we had better hedge our bets.

I can identify with what Joshua was going through, here. I'm not much one for stepping out blindly in faith, for risking safety and security, for treading confidently into the future. Like Joshua, I wouldn't mind a few spies sent on ahead to check the lay of the land, to test the water, to make a few educated guesses of their own to back up the promises of God - which might be nothing other than prudent for the kind of extended military campaign which Joshua was engaged in, but it is no way to win an Olympic medal.

I heard a lot of athletes interviewed after the various events, and I heard a lot of different things said, but I never heard the medal winners say, "*Well, Brian, I just went out there and played it safe, I didn't take any risks, not too many chances, hedged my bets, kept a bit in reserve, just kind of hoped I'd muddle through.*" That's no way to win an Olympic medal, and coincidentally, it is the original Olympics themselves which Paul uses to illustrate our lives in the service of God. Paul is writing the church in Corinth, and says:

*Remember that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize. You also must run in such a way that you will win. All athletes practice strict self-control. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. So I run straight to the goal with purpose in every step.*

Olympic victors back then were crowned with pine needle garlands, the "*prize that will fade away*" to which Paul referred. And when the heroes returned home, their cities might erect statues in their honour, have a parade, even exempt them from paying taxes! Exempted from paying taxes! Which makes me wonder how hard it can be learn to curl...

Paul is telling us that as the church, we need the kind of uncompromising, risk-taking, giving it all we've got kind of attitude of the Olympic athletes, if we are going to do the job that God would have us do - a job with eternal implications. We've been doing well so far - these past few years have been great! - but wouldn't it be exciting as a congregation to turn it up a notch, and see what we can really accomplish when we really put ourselves into it: ourselves, and the generous resources of time, energy and talents with which God has blessed us?

One last thing: I love watching the crowds at the Olympics cheer the athletes on, particularly those who are not the superstars, not the favourites, not in the lead. Those crazy North Korean cheerleader gangs are especially fun. All the athletes talk about how

the cheers give them such encouragement, as they feel the crowd urging them on. And it does make a difference! As one athlete said, “It just reminds me that I’m not alone, that I have my family and my country behind me, with me, stride for stride.” Well, that’s what Communion is. Communion is the tangible reminder that we are not alone, but together; that God is with us, within us, encouraging us, urging us on; that we are joined together with a great cloud of witnesses throughout time and place, together moving forward, running the race of faith, not for gold but for the glory of our God.

Our Annual Meeting will take place after the service. We will look back upon how God has blessed us, and others through us, and we will rejoice. Yet the real excitement lies not in what we have accomplished, but in what challenges and accomplishments lay before us, in our church, our community, and our world. Who knows what God has in store for us in 2018, as we seek to be faithful to God’s call? Who knows what challenges lay ahead, how our talents will be put to the test as we seek to follow the example of Jesus?

Who knows? God knows! And because God knows, he will, by the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through us, equip us for the tasks which lay ahead, and for the excitement and opportunity of the years to come.

Remember the words of the Olympic athletes shared with us earlier: *“I learned that life is better when I give everything to God... All I can do is use what He’s given me. All I can do is do the best I can... I can rely on God and know that He has a plan for me and things are in His control, not mine. That’s where my courage comes from.”* And remember too God’s word to Joshua, which we hear as God’s word to us today: *“Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”*

Together - together with one another and with the Power of the Holy Spirit – let’s do our part, let’s run the race, let’s reach for the prize, and together with those who have gone before and those with whom we join our hands and celebrate this Communion throughout the churches of our world today: together, let’s do the mighty work of God. Thanks be to God! Amen.