***Hebrews 12:1-2 Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.***

This morning, we lit the Advent candle of Joy. Joy is not to be confused with happiness. Too often, in the Christian walk, we confuse Joy with worldly happiness. We are always Joyful in Christ, while we may not always be happy with life. James 1:2 says *My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials*. Trials, as we learned from Romans 5, produce perseverance, perseverance, character, and character produces hope. No - Joy is a deeply satisfying gladness welling up inside of us, rooted in knowing Jesus, all He is, and He has done.

Verse 1 starts *Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses –* This is not referring to people watching from heaven. We are surrounded by witnesses – proof. An agreement can be a witness, as in Genesis 31:44 between Laban and Jacob - *Now therefore, come, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me.”* An object, like a stone marking the boundary of land is a witness. Those we’ve learned from are witnesses. Those living for Christ around us are witnesses. Those watching our walk are witnesses. We are surrounded by all kinds of witnesses to faith! The Bible bears witness. History bears witness. In fact, in Acts 1:8, the last thing Jesus said just before ascending into Heaven is - *But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.* We bear witness of Christ and all He has done! Even nature itself, as Psalm 19:1 says, bears witness to God’s glory and handiwork. Oh yes, those that want to see and hear have a great cloud of witnesses from many sources.

Verse 1 - goes on *let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.* As we know, in a race extra weight is the enemy. We too, as we prepare to run this race of Faith and persevere in this marathon of bearing witness daily, must lay aside every weight, every burden that distracts us from our course. Likewise, we are to avoid the sin that so readily surrounds us, beckoning to us, encouraging us to step off course, so that it might ensnare and entangle us. As we run, we must not become sluggish or dull of hearing, but remain enthusiastic and excited, looking for our Savior to return. This is our Joy! And, we are told to run with endurance the race that is set before us. The word for race here holds the idea of running with effort in a contest, almost like an obstacle course. So, what can we gather? First, the race will not be a sprint, but a marathon, requiring endurance. Second, the race will not be straight, flat, and level ground, but challenging! Matthew 7:14 - *Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.* Difficult, that Greek word is translated troubled in many other places in scripture.

Verse 2 starts - *looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith -*How do we stay on this course, setting aside extra weight, avoiding the sin that so easily distracts us, and endure the troubled way? We look unto Jesus. We fasten our eyes upon Jesus. The very author and finisher of our faith. He is the Chief Leader of our faith, the Designer of the race we’re running.

Verse 2 finishes - *who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.* Jesus, for the Joy set before Him – His race, just as we have a race set before us – for the deep abiding gladness that absorbed all else, endured the Cross, despising the shame. He knew the pain and humiliation to come; yet, the Gladness of setting all things right with God, saving mankind, and giving us the Way to gain eternal life made enduring the Cross worth it. And He has set down at the right hand of the throne of God, as High Priest for us. John 1:3 *All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made* – that sounds like an Author. In John 19:30 Jesus says from the Cross – *It is finished* – that sounds like a Finisher. And, through it all, His Joy is to complete His Father’s work.

This week, let’s embrace Joy, the deep abiding gladness for the Salvation provided by God, through Jesus. Romans 5:17 says *For if by the one man’s offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.* Our gladness, our joy is the Joy of Jesus. May we throw off the burdens of the past, turn from the sin all around, and run this race that others may witness and come to know the Joy of our Savior in this most precious Season of all. May we wake each morning and live each day in deep, abiding, all saturating gladness – pure Joy – that Jesus is coming again and today may just be that day!