

The Power of the Cross

By: Meagan McLaughlin

March 14, 2021. Challenges are part of human experience, and our life is meant to be lived in their midst. God doesn't always remove our challenges, but God does show us mercy. God promises he will always be with us no matter what happens, that suffering and death will not be the final word. And as Pastor Meagan preaches today, the cross is evidence for that.

Readings: [Numbers 21:4-9](#)

*** Transcript ***

On March 7, 1965 black people and allies, led by 25-year-old John Lewis, marched toward the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama as part of a long, hard journey for freedom — and in particular the right for black people to vote. They planned to cross the bridge that day and continue on to Montgomery, but instead they were met by one of the more brutal assaults in the history of civil rights. So much blood was shed, and so many people died as the result of dogs, chains, hoses, and clubs, that it became known as Bloody Sunday. After that attack, many wondered if they should just give up. Martin Luther King himself, it is said, wondered about the wisdom of trying again after what had happened.

And in spite of the progress that has been made since then, the struggle against racism continues. And this week the Minneapolis community is praying its way through the beginning of the trial for the person who murdered George Floyd last May 25th. The same pain, wondering, exhaustion, and woundedness the freedom fighters felt after Bloody Sunday is very real among those still working for justice today in George Floyd Square.

The Israelites' journey from Egypt to the Promised Land had been really long, and like the march to Montgomery and the struggle for justice today, it was not exactly easy. They had been walking in the desert for literally years, nearly starved before God provided manna for them. And when some of them were taken captive by the Canaanites, they had to fight to defeat them. And they still weren't there yet.

And as our journey in COVID continues — one year ago tomorrow we made the decision to close our buildings for a while — we may be feeling this too. We are so tired, but we still haven't arrived yet. The Israelites' walk continued, and after all that time they were getting really sick of eating only manna. And, we are told, they complained not once, but continually. They whined, as Mr. Jesse talked about. "Are we there yet?!"

So often, we move along in our routines until we find ourselves expecting that this is how life should be. Work gets done, bills paid, vacations taken, decisions made, perhaps with some bumps along the way, but more or less predictable. And when things happen to make life difficult, our first response is typically to complain, as the Israelites did. The food is not good or hot or fast enough. The internet keeps cutting out on us, right in the middle of that email we're sending — or worse yet, in the middle of a Zoom meeting with our boss or our teacher. We have to wait too long in traffic, or the doctor's office, or the grocery store.

The Israelites were sick of manna, and they complained. It's so human, isn't it? And they soon found themselves facing something much bigger than boring food. Poisonous snakes, perhaps symbolic of the toxic atmosphere they had created in their community, came into the camp, and many of them died. Suddenly the food didn't matter, and they realized how foolish they had been, having forgotten that

God freed them, fed them, and given them water to drink when they were thirsty — having forgotten that they still had each other, that God was still with them. They realized their sin and told Moses to ask God to have mercy on them. And in the mind of the Israelites, mercy meant removing the snakes that were biting them.

God didn't remove the snakes, but God did show mercy. Interestingly enough, the proof of God's mercy looked just like the thing the Israelites feared the most: the snakes. God told Moses to raise a bronze serpent in the middle of the camp, a reminder of both the sin of the people, and the faithfulness of God. Like Mr. Jesse said, God is big enough for all this, isn't he? By looking at the bronze serpent raised in their camp, the Israelites saw that their God was bigger than a few poisonous reptiles, and even their own sin and brokenness. God assured them that God was with them, even in the midst of this. The snakes remained, but the people lived. A source of pain and fear and death was transformed into a symbol of God's faithfulness and triumph over death. And I am struck that as we read these passages this year, in the middle of George Floyd Square in Minneapolis another bronze statue has been raised — an image of a black hand, a reminder of both the pain and damage of the sin of racism that still exists, and the resilience and hope of redemption to come for all of us.

Often, the big challenges in our lives — unemployment, illness, death — are not removed either. These things are not interruptions to the life we are supposed to live, although they can certainly feel that way. Nor are they, as the Israelites believed, punishment from God for sin — although at times, if we're honest, it can feel like that too. The truth is, the challenges of life are all a part of human experience, and our life is meant to be lived in their midst. Sometimes these challenges are of our own making, or someone else's, and they truly are the result of choices made, natural consequences of our sin. And sometimes, difficult things just happen. Life is not always easy, and it is certainly not what we might think of as fair. But either way, the struggles and pain we experience does not mean that God has abandoned us.

God never promised that life would be easy, or go according to our plans, but God did promise that God would be faithful to the covenant and always be with us, no matter what happens. God did promise that suffering and death will not be the final word. And the proof of that for us as Christians is revealed in another symbol of pain and humiliation and death — the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross. As we make our way through Lent, we look to the cross, and remember not only the reality of Jesus' death, but the truth that because of the resurrection, the cross, like the bronze snake, is transformed into evidence that God has power over everything, even death.

Our encounter with the cross of Jesus does not take away the challenges of our lives, but it transforms them — it transforms us. When we are finished with our complaining, our questioning, our blaming, God is still right there with us, and the cross of Jesus is proof of that promise. The cross reminds us that the little things in life — long lines, spotty internet service, cold food — are not really that important. And the big things, the real sin and pain and struggles of life, are not too much for God to handle.

God created us to bring good and beauty into this world, and we can trust God to make it possible for us to do that, even when we don't see how we can possibly make a difference. The Israelites, and centuries later the marchers in Selma, and today those who continue to seek healing and justice in Minneapolis and across the country, lived out that truth in every step they took. We too are called to march on, carrying the truth of faith in that struggle.

When we in our humanity fail, as we are bound to, the cross reminds us that God is still there, giving us the courage and the strength to face the ways we have caused or contributed to the struggles of this

world. We have seen in the last year how economic injustice and inequities in access to health care and other resources that continue to exist have resulted in a stark disparity in how the pandemic has impacted marginalized communities, and how reluctance to change allows these and other wounds in the world to continue.

Debie Thomas says in her blog this week, “In other words, he unveiled the poison, he showed us the snake, he revealed what our human kingdoms, left to themselves, will *always* become unless God in God’s mercy delivers us. In the cross, we are forced to see what our refusal to love . . . , our hatred of difference, our addiction to judgment, and our fear of the Other must wreak. When the Son of Man is lifted up, we see with chilling and desperate clarity our need for a God who will take our most horrific instruments of death, and transform them, at great cost, for the purposes of resurrection.” We look to the cross, acknowledge our sin, and ask God for forgiveness and help. And we're renewed for the journey.

When we're in pain, the cross is a symbol of the promise that even death is not the final word. We have a God who answers prayer, if not in the ways we might expect. God has promised to be with us, to lead us to truth and redemption when we can't see the way.

God will not break the covenant, no matter how we stumble. From the Israelites in the desert, to the marchers in Selma in 1965, to each of us today, God loves, forgives, and strengthens us. Nothing is too much for God to handle — even our whining. And every time we see the cross, we are reminded of the lengths God will go to keep that promise.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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