

Lent 3 Sermon  
The Rev. Megan Dembi

Last week we talked about the importance of deepening our faith, especially in the season of Lent, so that we do not equate our faith with a children's story. We talked about the fact that God does not operate like Santa Clause, where if you act good you'll get good things and if you act badly you'll get bad things. Because the culmination of our faith does not occur in this life. We do not have faith so that we might be blessed in this world, but so that we might obtain the promise of eternal life in the world to come. Perhaps it's not too difficult to accept that we will receive good things in this life that we feel do not deserve, and also some bad that we feel we may not deserve. But many of us probably would like to think that our faith in God will protect us from true suffering—that if we are faithful than somehow God will shield us from pain in this world—or at least pain that we didn't earn somehow.

This idea is explicitly promised in some faith traditions. Faith traditions that teach reincarnation, for example, often also teach that any sufferings or pain that a person may experience is proper punishment for some sort of wrongdoing, if not in their current life, then in a previous life. Yet this is different from the Christian message. The Christian message does not teach that those who are good will avoid suffering in this life. In fact, often the most faithful people in the history of our church were martyred for their faith. Christianity has many examples of people throughout history who faced true suffering, in spite of or even because of their faithfulness. Christianity does not teach that being a Christian will shield you from suffering, or that being a Christian will automatically make you a good person. We acknowledge that you will encounter bad, encounter evil, and that you will inevitably perpetuate bad/evil yourself. But we have a savior that has sacrificed himself for us in spite of our sinfulness and the wrongs we have done, and who is with us always, even in the midst of the suffering of this life.

The Israelites following Moses in the wilderness in the book of Exodus were not yet at the point in their faith where they realized this—where they understood that their relationship with God would not lead to a life of leisure. As they were traveling, they became thirsty and wanted water to drink. Now this complaint would not be a problem in-and-of-itself. The issue was that once the Israelites experienced this suffering, they began to question if the Lord was among them or not. They began to accuse Moses, God's messenger, of leading them out of Egypt only to kill them with thirst. They did not understand that God was always with them, no matter what pains or sufferings they may face. And they certainly did not understand that even though their faith does not prevent the sufferings of this world, their faith could help them in the midst of their sufferings.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he acknowledges that the Church will encounter suffering. But he tells them that through our faith, even our sufferings can be transformed for good. Paul tells the Romans "We boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." And Paul reminds them from where their hope lies. "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly...God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." Yes, Christ did not die for the righteous. Christ died for the ungodly. To be a Christian doesn't mean following an antiquated code of ethics. It's not about believing in a hope that that will somehow shield us from suffering—it's about following a Savior who died for those who did not deserve his sacrifice, and maintaining hope in that sacrifice in the midst of the sufferings of this world.

This is the faith that we are called by Christ to invite others in to—to spread throughout the world. A faith that does not promise that once someone believes their lives will be perfect—that if they become Christians they will not have problems. It's a faith with a reward that far outweighs any sufferings of this life, the promise of everlasting life with Christ. And that promise changes the way we

view the sufferings of this world. Though our faith does not claim our sufferings are irrelevant, we know we can gain through our sufferings through our faith. And we know that in spite of our sufferings and in spite of our wrongdoings, we have a savior who has redeemed us.

This is the truth that the Samaritan woman at the well discovered when she encountered Christ. This woman would have known pain and suffering. The very fact that she had to travel an unknown distance from her home to this well in order to quench her thirst hints at this. Yet by meeting Christ she learns that her sufferings do not compare to the promise Christ offers. It is at this well that Christ teaches her of the living water on which she should put her hope, the living water of eternal life. And she is convinced of this promise, not because Christ performed some miracle or alleviated her suffering, but because Christ knew of her past sins, and was offering her the gift of eternal life in spite of them. Thus the Samaritan woman came to believe, and not only did she herself believe, she began to tell others about Christ, and his promise of eternal life. Through her testimony they began to believe. Because of this they allowed Christ into their own lives, and once they did their faith deepened. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

It is was not an assurance that God would spare them the sufferings of this world that inspired the Samaritans to believe. It was the assurance that Christ's promise of eternal life is given not only to the righteous, but also to sinners. It was the knowledge that Christ was present in the midst of the sufferings of this world. And the first step to the Samaritans believing was by hearing the testimony of someone who had already come to believe—the woman at the well.

This story not only reiterates one of the basic principles about our faith—that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, it also demonstrates the importance of sharing the faith in which we have come to believe. It shows us how important it is to tell people about the gospel so that they will be open to accepting Christ in their lives, and how then their relationship with God can flourish. And it shows that we do not have to be special or a perfect person to spread the faith to others. The Samaritan woman was believed because Christ knew her faults. And yet the fact that she had this encounter with the messiah, in spite of her faults, inspired people to believe. Perhaps they, even with all of their faults, could encounter Christ in their own lives as well.

That doesn't mean that everyone who hears the story of Christ will believe. That was the problem with the Israelites. Even though they knew why they were following Moses out of Egypt and were led by God, every time they encountered adversity, rather than praying to God for help they always accused God of sending them out into the wilderness to die. Some will not want to follow a faith that does not promise they will not longer encounter suffering in this world. And it is not our responsibility to ensure that others will believe in Christ, but it is our responsibility as Christians, as inheritors of the promise of eternal life which Christ has earned for us, to seek to teach the faith to others—to bring others to the knowledge of Christ in the midst of the sufferings of this world. Because even though our faith does not promise we will never suffer, through our faith we can better endure the sufferings of this world, and look forward to our life in the world to come. And through our faith and the love of God, we have the power to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth, with God's help. Amen.