

3rd Sunday in Lent – March 20th, 2022
GOD IS FAITHFUL EVEN WHEN WE AREN'T

Prayer

Jesus, you are the living word, we pray that the words spoken and heard here would bind us together as your body and enable us to join you in the work that you're doing here in our community.

AMEN

Cultural Knowledge

When people talk about history, especially history that is either culturally important or that they have lived through, they often use a type of shorthand to describe it. If you've lived in California for a while, I could mention the Northridge Earthquake, the Sylmar Earthquake, or the Whittier Narrows Earthquake; and you would most likely remember - from just those short titles - the what, when, and where of those events. Those from the Midwest or East Coast might talk the same way about tornados or hurricanes. Other events have national or international significances - such as 9/11. If you were alive at that time, you probably even remember what you were doing when you heard the news as the events of that day unfolded.

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You may be asking – where is he going with this? I bring it up because much of today's epistle includes similar short phrases about God's dealing with His people from the time of Moses. The Apostle's hearers would be familiar with the events he mentions and would immediately understand the references. I'm not sure we do, so I would like to unpack some of those references.

Foreshadowing

In the opening paragraph, St. Paul begins by recounting the flight from Egypt. Moses led this army of nomadic people – they pitched tents, moved toward the promised land, and ate and drank spiritual food and water. This Old Testament pattern is a foreshadowing of our relationship with Christ. Moses and the Israelites had a pillar of fire by night and pillar of cloud by day to guide them in their journey; we have the indwelling Holy Spirit to guide us in our daily lives. They were set apart and joined with Moses by NOT getting wet and passing through the Red Sea on dry ground; we are joined with Christ by getting wet – with water and the word – at our baptisms. The Hebrews were sustained both physically and spiritually by bread – manna – and water. As Christ's disciples, we are fed spiritually by His very body and blood in Holy

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Communion. They were headed toward a narrow strip of fertile land on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea; we are headed toward an eternal home with Christ in Heaven. The next section of today's Epistle contains those terse reminders of key points in their collective history.

Worshipping Idols

Within a year after leaving Egypt, God gave his people a set of rules that we know as the 10 commandments. But at the very time that Moses was conversing with God, the rest of the people were impatient and wanted something tangible to worship – a physical idol. In a spectacular show of poor judgement and leadership, Moses' brother Aaron just went along with the crowd and even enabled the creation of the golden calf. While we still have some remnants of worship of physical idols today – such as the statues of Buddha present in so many of our local stores, most of OUR idols are not physical but spiritual – anything that competes for our love for God is an idol – the created rather than the Creator, be it food, drink, recreation, entertainment, work, wealth, and the list goes on.

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Sexual Immorality

I should note that these individual events are not in chronological order. The most likely event where 23,000 died was toward the end of their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, just before Moses' death. You can find the story in Numbers 25. In summary, the sexual immorality of the men of Israel with Moabite women led to worship of false gods; specifically, Baal of Peor. God, being a jealous God, demanded the death of those who had trusted in these false Gods.

Snakebites

The 3rd event, recorded in Numbers 21 may be more familiar to us since it is referenced more than once in the New Testament. It happened less than a year prior to worship of Baal, when Israel was conquering cities and peoples so that they could live in the promised land. The people spoke against God and against Moses, and God sent poisonous snakes to kill the people. But God also provided a way of escape – a bronze serpent on a pole. All people had to do was to look at this object and they didn't die; just as we who are dying because of our sin look to Christ on the Cross and are healed. It's from this brief story that we get the symbol for the health professions – a snake wound around a pole.

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Angel of Death

The final warning goes back again to the start of the Exodus from Egypt. The 10th and final plague that God visited upon the land of Egypt, the Angel of Death killed the firstborn of all living things if they didn't have the blood of a lamb on the doorpost as a sign. Jews since then have commemorated this "passing over" of the Angel of Death with a ritual meal and celebration. And just like the blood of a physical lamb kept the Angel of Death from executing judgement upon the Hebrews, the blood of the Christ, the Lamb of God, covers our sins and inequities and saves us from eternal death.

Nothing New

These examples are merely that – specific instances of a cycle of rebellion, punishment, and subsequent restoration to God's that can be found throughout scripture – in both the New and Old Testaments. To quote a cartoon I saw recently, "Those that don't study history are doomed to repeat it. but those that DO study history are doomed to watch helplessly while other people repeat it."

Luther reminds us of this cycle in the first of his 95-theses, saying:

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When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said "Repent," he intended that the entire life of believers should be one of repentance.

All of the Christian life is repentance. Turning from sin and trusting in the good news that Jesus saves sinners isn't merely a one-time inaugural experience but the daily substance of Christianity. The gospel is for every day and every moment. Repentance is to be the Christian's continual posture.

God is Faithful

The Church is the bride of Christ, but what unfaithful bride we are; He continues to be the faithful and forgiving groom. Paul, in his second letter to Timothy (2 Tim 2:13) says:

If we are faithless, he remains faithful — for he cannot deny himself.

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Centuries earlier, Jeremiah wrote in Lamentations (Lam 3:22-23):

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness!

And even in the midst of the examples of rebellion highlighted in the text, Moses was able to write (Num 23:19):

God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?

We can rejoice in the fact that our God keeps his promises to us – to adopt us as His children through the waters of Baptism, to maintain a pure and accurate record of His dealings with His people throughout history in this book we call the Bible, and to feed us spiritually with His own body and blood in the supper that we share.

To finish with another Luther quote from his explanation of the first article of the creed:

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All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve, and obey Him.

I pray this would be OUR daily response to the gift He has given us and that whenever we see a serpent winding about a rod we would be reminded of Jesus on the cross and the eternal healing and restoration that come to each of us because of His sacrifice.

AMEN