

Facing Our Brokenness Head-On

By: Meagan McLaughlin

March 10, 2024. Today, the proverbial rubber meets the road. Pastor Meagan urges us to know our own brokenness, like the Israelites being bitten by serpents in our reading from Numbers, and to face it head-on.

Readings: [Numbers 21:4-9](#), [Ephesians 2:1-10](#), [John 3:14-21](#)

*** Transcript ***

Some years ago, I did something that hurt someone else. I didn't intend to hurt them. I didn't even realize it at the time. But when it was over, harm had been done. The kind of harm that brings heat to the cheeks and a rock in the gut. Can anyone recognized that? Can anyone identify with that? The kind of harm that leads to a desire to never show my face in public again, at least where that person is concerned. It wasn't the first time and it won't be the last. I am human after all. But this time it felt epic. And when those times come, as they do for all of us, the first thing we want to do is turn away, right? Until we can't.

Today on this fourth Sunday of Lent, as we continue to walk the way of the cross, we are called to do something that is, in fact, infinitely harder than anything we've been asked to do so far. Up to this point we have talked about claiming God's love for us and following God's call into the unknown in ways that can be hard and scary. But today, we face the wilderness inside, the brokenness each of us carries as a saint and a sinner, as Luther would say.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn famously concluded, "When I lay there on rotting prison straw, it was disclosed to me that the line separating good from evil passes not through states or classes, or between political parties either, but right through every human heart — through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good remains. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains an uprooted small corner of evil."

Martin Luther would definitely agree with this. Luther wrote and preached often about the reality of our human condition. We are all saint, and we are all sinner. As humans we have a capacity to love and be in relationship with God and with others, but we also have a capacity to do evil, to sin. And we all need God.

The Israelites faced sin in in a rather graphic way, today's reading from Numbers tells us. Poisonous serpents come into the camp biting many of the people, and there is no cure — until Moses, at God's direction, sets a serpent on a pole and commands the people to look at it if they wish to live. In order to be freed of their sin, they have to face it head-on.

Oof. That is not an easy task. None of us wants to do that with the pain it brings, right? None of us really wants to know our own brokenness. But that is our invitation today, as uncomfortable as it is. Over time, there have been many ways of understanding and defining sin. We can sometimes think of sin as breaking rules that God has set out for us, not following the Ten Commandments, or things that Jesus taught. German Lutheran theologian Rudolf Bultmann defined sin as dependence on anything that isn't God. Luther, along the same vein, said virtue becomes the worst form of sin, because it leads us to trust ourselves and not Jesus. In *The Essential Tillich*, Paul Tillich says, "In any case sin is

separation. To be in the state of sin is to be in a state of separation . . . among individual lives, separation of a man from himself, and separation of all men from the ground of being," which is God.

However we define sin, today our job is, like the Israelites millennia ago: face our brokenness head-on. We've been untruthful at times, with ourselves, God, and others. We have put our trust in our own abilities, or on other people's opinions of us, or things we get from this world. And we've disregarded our need for God. We have stood to the side while hunger, homelessness, and violence rage around us. We have harmed others by letting the injustice of poverty, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression in our world go unchecked. We have failed to face our own sin, our own complicity in the brokenness of this world, because it feels easier sometimes not to look. Right? Despite our own reluctance, like the Israelites we are called today to gaze at the serpent and know that we too have sinned, and we too need God.

In the end, as Jesus tells us in the Gospel of John today, we Christians look to the cross. We know our own sinfulness. And while we gaze at the broken body of Christ, we hear the echo of Jesus' words of promise: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Today, the proverbial rubber meets the road. And we recognize in a profound way that as Luther taught: resurrection, new life, comes not through easy peace and perfection, but through the cross. We know the truth of Paul's words in his letter to the Ephesians: "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ." Where there is brokenness and pain, God is there bringing life, healing, and love in the midst of suffering. So we can face our brokenness, ask God for forgiveness and help, knowing that God's mercy will not fail us. For God so loved the world.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

2024, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, Pastor Meagan McLaughlin, Numbers 21:4-9, Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:14-21, Paul Tillich, The Essential Tillich, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, snakes, Rudolf Bultmann