

Lenten Message Series: Signs for Life: Learning to Navigate Spiritual Living

Feb. 26 - April 12

Series Text: Jeremiah 31:21-22a

“Set up road signs; put up guideposts. Take note of the highway, the road that you take. Return, O Virgin Israel, return to your towns. How long will you wander, O unfaithful daughter?”

Sun., April 5: Palm/Passion Sunday, Sixth Sunday of Lent

Message: Signs for Life: CURVES AHEAD

Scripture: James 1:1-18

Text: Habakkuk 3:17-18 “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.

Memory Verse: “I’ve said these things to you so that you will have peace in me. In the world you will have troubles. But be encouraged! I have conquered the world.” -John 16:33

Blurb: Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble.” Jesus said that His way was steep, and narrow, and hard. Then, Jesus headed toward Jerusalem to take up His cross. He calls to His disciples, “Take up your cross and follow me.” When we do, we find that there are great blessings during the curves!

Welcome -Pastor David

Welcome to Palm and Passion Sunday!

Kids: Ms. Sue video

Today: No Holy Communion - Do it Thursday.

Easter at Home this week. Bags. Call the church!

The church is open all week!

Memory Verse -Pastor David

“I’ve said these things to you so that you will have peace in me. In the world you will have troubles. But be encouraged! I have conquered the world.” -John 16:33

Worship Music -Sanctify

Palm Sunday Story: With the waving of the palms.

King of Glory

Hosanna (Praise is Rising)

Great Are You Lord

Worship Prayer -Andrew

Offering -Pastor Andrew

Prayers: Palm prayers -Pastor Andrew

Generational Bridge: See video by Ms. Sue.

Apostles' Creed: "My Version of the Apostles' Creed, by Jacqueline Wyne"

"I believe in God the creator almighty, Creator of heaven and earth,

"And in Jesus Christ His only Son our savior: who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and buried. He went down into hell. On the third day He was once more alive and went to sit at the right hand of God almighty. From there he will come back to judge the living and the dead.

"I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic church, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins and the darkness, the resurrection of our flesh and life everlasting. "Amen."

Message: Signs for Life #8: CURVES AHEAD -David

Call to Focus:

L: We are on the journey of Lent. God has given us road signs for the journey.

P: We are on the journey of life. God has given us road signs for the journey.

L: Jeremiah 31:21 says, "Set up road signs; put up guideposts. Take note of the highway, the road that you take."

P: STOP. Stop to discern your journey. Stop to reorient your lives. Stop sinning.

L: NO OUTLET. So many paths in life lead to nothing. We come to see clearly.

P: SPEED LIMIT. God's timing is always right. We must take care not to travel along our path of life faster or slower than God has planned for us.

L: DO NOT ENTER. We stick to God's path with perseverance. We keep fast to the center.

P: YIELD. We let God have His way. We produce a harvest.

L: ONE WAY. God's way is better. We turn around and choose it.

P: CURVES AHEAD. Jesus embraced the curves in His road, and because of that, we have salvation.

L: Our lives have curves, too. We can go in confidence knowing that Jesus will carry us through.

P: We come to see the road signs God has placed for our life's journeys.

Signs for Life: Learning to Navigate Spiritual Living. CURVES AHEAD. Habakkuk 3:17-18
"Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.

"Crap happens."

A more vulgar version of that phrase is all over our popular culture today.

Or here's another one ever so popular on bumper stickers. I'll tone it down a bit, too. "Life stinks. Then you die."

We've been hearing a lot of that these past few weeks. We're under the Coronavirus outbreak. In Minnesota alone, hundreds are sick, dozens have died. We're all wrestling with changed plans and lost opportunities. We're missing out on so much. Not to mention all the *other* hardships ongoing all around. Just read though our prayer list!

Crap does happen. It happens all the time. And there are times it gets worse. Life is hard, full with all kinds of trouble and hardships. It is hard right up until the end.

Now, we tend to shake our heads and wring our hands about it all, especially lately. But you know what? These sayings were well cemented long before this outbreak. People have been

experiencing hard lives ever since the beginning of time. I've been sifting through the Bible, and I've been thinking about the Christians I know, and from what I can tell, it's always been true.

Think for a moment. Scan through all the major biblical figures you remember. Name one that didn't experience all kinds of troubles. I can't. Their lives were hard. And then they died. Same with the great Christians I know. My saintly Grandmother died of leukemia. My pastor father died early of heart disease. Dietrich Bonhoffer was killed in a Nazi concentration camp. Mother Teresa didn't own a penny. Billie Graham had Parkinson's. Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble."

So where do we get this idea from that it shouldn't be? Why is it that we are so shocked when we encounter bad stuff? How many times have you said, "Why did this happen?," "Why did this have to happen *to me?*," "Why didn't God prevent this?" I've said it. More than once. But where does it come from?

Part of it, I think, comes from our affluence and high standard of living. We don't experience the common hardships of most people in our world. Even amid a toilette paper shortage, we still have ample food, clothing, shelter, all the necessities. We have modern health care, with so many amazing treatments...ones being developing for COVID-19. With the huge stock market crash last month, the markets *only* dropped down to where they were 5 years ago! Our daily living is more pampered than most people have ever known. One hundred years ago children were working 10-hour days in factories. When we bought my father's grave in 1988, they were sold in threes: one for the dad, one for the mom, and one for all the children who were expected to die in infancy. It's been three generations since we've had a war that drafted people from each family. My mother remembers eating rotting food growing up. We aren't calloused from hard daily living like we used to be. My grandpa was a farmer. He barely noticed a bleeding cut on his thick, calloused hands. I, however, with my computer fingers soft from lotion, whine about a paper cut!

Cushy lives lead to lack of resilience. Tell me, do any of you lack cruise control or air conditioning in your car, or have to—gasp!—*crank* your window? Barbaric! Cushy lives protected with all kinds of insurance, gives us a false sense of security and a feeling of insulation from the crap of life. So when it does happen, like the recent outbreak, we are all the more surprised, We freak out, and we struggle to even cope with the *inconveniences* it causes.

But I think it also comes from our religion, too. Although the Bible is honest about the hardships of life, we hear selectively. We hear how much God loves us, wants the best for us, is always there helping us, sends guardian angels to hover over us, protects us and cares for our every need. We hear how God is good, and only wants good things for His children. We hear how God is all powerful, and can make anything happen. God gives rest to the weary and lifts up the fallen. God is on the side of justice, and hates all oppression. And God is actively changing our world for the better. All we need to do is simply ask, seek, knock. How much more is our heavenly Father willing to give all good things to His children. All this we hear. And it is all true: I haven't said anything unbiblical yet! But with *selective hearing*, we gloss over where the Bible also says that troubles happen. And then, in our lives, when crap happens, we're crushed.

So, what do we do? Some dismiss God altogether. Tornadoes and starving children prove that a loving God is not real. A while back I was at a funeral for a man who had been exceptionally active in his church until his little girl died of leukemia. Then, he never darkened the door of the church again. He turned his back on God. He spent the rest of his life doing good and trying to help children through charitable organizations and fund-raising efforts. But he died a bitter, hopeless man.

Others demote God. God is all powerful, but not all loving. Or, God is loving, but not all powerful. This was Rabbi Kushner claim in his best-selling *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*. God is loving, but not able to stop all the troubles of the world.

Most, however, don't come to a solid position, and either lean too far to superstition (reciting prayers, buying statues, giving money to try to buy God's blessing) or get angry with God.

How many times have I heard, "God's not smiling on me anymore" or "God's forgotten about me" or "Pastor, pray for me. God's not listening to my prayers." We get angry. It's not the way it ought to be. God could prevent it, and doesn't. God should do something, but doesn't.

But today we see a very different view of our God. The Jesus who came to heal the sick and restore the blind, to fight for the oppressed and push back injustice, walks into Jerusalem to go pick up a cross. The crowd cannot understand hardship. So they see His arrival as a victory. They wave palm branches, sing praises and proclaim Hosanna! Jesus, however, weeps.

Before the week is over, almighty God will be condemned, whipped, and nailed to a cross. That's in the Bible, too, you know! What does this tell us about our God's view of suffering? Jesus didn't avoid Jerusalem. He embraced it. And this is the Jesus we've committed to follow!

Jesus said that His way was steep, and narrow, and hard. He calls to His disciples, "Take up your cross and follow me." "In this world you will have troubles."

Rather than a God who spares us from hardship, we find Him putting up CURVES AHEAD signs. The path ahead is not easy and straight. It is not smooth sailing. It is full of twists and turns. Be on alert. Be careful. Be prepared.

So, as we look ahead to the cross that stands in front of Jesus, we need to re-imagine what God's life for us is like. God does not promise to deliver us from pain and suffering.

Why not?

Well, I can't answer this perfectly. But I can see that Jesus' suffering produced a greater good. God is more interested in earning salvation than He was in staying safe.

Bible Reading: James 1:1-18 (CEB)

1 From James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. To the twelve tribes who are scattered outside the land of Israel. Greetings!

2 My brothers and sisters, think of the various tests you encounter as occasions for joy. 3 After all, you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. 4 Let this endurance complete its work so that you may be fully mature, complete, and lacking in nothing.

And so, I think we also need to correct our selective hearing in the Bible. Let's take a look at James, chapter 1. Now, this is an incredible chapter. I can't do it justice this morning. But even one reading will help correct our bias about our life's journeys.

Verse 1, "From James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. To the twelve tribes who are scattered outside the land of Israel. Greetings! My brothers and sisters, think of the various tests you encounter as occasions for joy."

James is Jesus' half brother, and the administrative head of the Early Church. He is writing to Christians scattered by persecution. He barely gets through his introduction before sputtering verse 2, "Consider it pure joy when you face trials of many kinds...."

Notice, he doesn't offer them promises of relief, or encouragement that help is on its way. They're suffering trials, and he says, "Isn't it great?" And he knew Jesus. He grew up with Him!

Evidently, trials are not something from which we necessarily should be delivered. There's a novel idea for you! *Instead, they are a blessing.* What? Why? Let's keep going. "After all, you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance." Hardships, and trials, and pain are blessings, in that they act as a purifying process for our faith.

You see, James tells us what God is actually after. Verse 4, “Let this endurance complete its work so that you may be fully mature, complete, and lacking in nothing.” God’s not interested in making life easy, or cushy, or sparing us from all hardship. Instead, God is after spiritual maturity and wholeness. He wants tested, tried and true Christians, strong in faith, reliable, useable, whose faith has substance and resilience, and can hold up under strain. That’s what God’s after. Not making life easy or convenient. Not removing pain and heartache, but instead Christians able to bear pain and heartache. That way we can also bear the pain and heartache of those around us, of our world...just like our Savior.

Bible Reading: James 1:1-18 (CEB)

5 But anyone who needs wisdom should ask God, whose very nature is to give to everyone without a second thought, without keeping score. Wisdom will certainly be given to those who ask. 6 Whoever asks shouldn't hesitate. They should ask in faith, without doubting. Whoever doubts is like the surf of the sea, tossed and turned by the wind. 7 People like that should never imagine that they will receive anything from the Lord. 8 They are double-minded, unstable in all their ways.

Testing of our faith builds perseverance, and perseverance will develop our faith to its fullest end. Look at verse 6. “Whoever asks shouldn't hesitate. They should ask in faith, without doubting. Whoever doubts is like the surf of the sea, tossed and turned by the wind. People like that should never imagine that they will receive anything from the Lord. They are double-minded, unstable in all their ways.”

The opposite of the mature person is one who doubts amid hardship, whose faith falters. Not that Christians don't waver, or doubt. But God's intent is to make us strong in faith. A person with weak faith is tossed about like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That kind of person misses God's full blessing.

Bible Reading: James 1:1-18 (CEB)

9 Brothers and sisters who are poor should find satisfaction in their high status. 10 Those who are wealthy should find satisfaction in their low status, because they will die off like wildflowers. 11 The sun rises with its scorching heat and dries up the grass so that its flowers fall and its beauty is lost. Just like that, in the midst of their daily lives, the wealthy will waste away. 12 Those who stand firm during testing are blessed. They are tried and true. They will receive the life God has promised to those who love Him as their reward.

Further, comfort and pleasures in this world are merely passing. Look at verse 10. “Those who are wealthy should find satisfaction in their low status, because they will die off like wildflowers. The sun rises with its scorching heat and dries up the grass so that its flowers fall and its beauty is lost. Just like that, in the midst of their daily lives, the wealthy will waste away.”

Instead, the one who perseveres under trial is blessed. Verse 12, “Those who stand firm during testing are blessed. They are tried and true. They will receive the life God has promised to those who love Him as their reward.” The crown here is not the ruling crown of power, but the laurel wreath of victory...victory to inherit life eternal that will be without suffering and sorrow and pain.

Bible Reading: James 1:1-18 (CEB)

13 No one who is tested should say, “God is tempting me!” This is because God is not tempted by any form of evil, nor does he tempt anyone. 14 Everyone is tempted by their own cravings; they are lured away and enticed by them. 15 Once those cravings conceive, they give birth to sin; and when sin grows up, it gives birth to death.

So, don’t blame God for your problems. Verse 13, “No one who is tested should say, ‘God is tempting me!’ This is because God is not tempted by any form of evil, nor does he tempt anyone. Everyone is tempted by their own cravings; they are lured away and enticed by them. Once those cravings conceive, they give birth to sin; and when sin grows up, it gives birth to death.”

Don’t blame God. Instead, put the blame where it belongs—the temptations reside within yourself and your own sinful desire. If we let our evil desire actually conceive, and be gratified, then that is sin. And sin only brings death.

Bible Reading: James 1:1-18 (CEB)

16 Don’t be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. 17 Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all. 18 He chose to give us birth by His true word, and here is the result: we are like the first crop from the harvest of everything He created.

Good things come from God. Verse 17, Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all. He chose to give us birth by His true word, and here is the result: we are like the first crop from the harvest of everything He created.”

God is good and loving and wants to spare us, but at the same time He also doesn’t spare us, because He wants to develop in us a solid faith that relies on Him no matter what, and that is able to deal with the pain of our world. Parents—human parents—understand this.

Bible Reading: Signs for Life: CURVES AHEAD

“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.” -Habakkuk 3:17-18

As we now hear fully, we see both God’s signs of promise and blessing *and* the CURVES AHEAD signs He’s posted. We see Jesus’ triumphal entry, but we also see Calvary looming in the background.

Because God is so gracious, so not willing to leave us the way we are, so desiring us to grow and mature, so wanting us to become holy, God has not straightened the road, on purpose. As we journey through the curves, we consider it pure joy, for through them we learn true faith. We will have a character and depth that is mature and complete.

Deep in the prophets of the Old Testament is a surprising passage I discovered again just this past week. It gives a glimpse of the kind of faith God is looking for. Habakkuk 3:17-18 says, “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails

and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.”

That’s what God is after. Not whining, or doubting, or being angry, or turning away from God. Instead, He’s after that mature joy that is not dependant on ease of life...that joy that pervades no matter what state we find ourselves in...that joy that shows the grace of God to others in spite of hardships and trials.

Do you see how the verse ends? We have all this joy because we have God our Savior. We have Jesus. We have His death on the cross, which earns our forgiveness. We have His gift of life, that perfects us and makes us holy. We have His resurrection, which gives us life eternal. We have joy amid the troubles, because we have Jesus.

This week, I want you to work on your prayer life. For just one week, try not to ask God to spare you from hardship. Don’t ask Him to take away your pain or suffering. Instead, thank Him for it. Ask Him to be with you, to carry you through it, to grow you, to use it to work holiness in you.

As you see the CURVES AHEAD sign ahead on your path, don’t put on the break. Keep going. Steer into them. Face them with acceptance, with anticipation, with joy. For it is on the curves of life that we learn how to rightly journey.

Amen.

Closing Song: *Rejoice the Lord Is King* -Sanctify

Memory Verse -David

“I’ve said these things to you so that you will have peace in me. In the world you will have troubles. But be encouraged! I have conquered the world.” -John 16:33

Announcements -David

Holy Week Services: Easter at Home Bags:

Thurs., April 9: Maundy Thursday Holy Communion

Eat your Thursday evening meal, and then finish your meal by celebrating Holy Communion by watching the video (supplies in the Easter at Home Bag).

Fri., April 10 - Sun., April 12: Good Friday Prayer Vigil.

Pray for a half an hour by lighting the candle and holding the pocket cross (provided in the Easter at Home Bag). Sign up for a remote time slot on the church website.

Sun., April 10 at 6 a.m. Easter Sunrise Worship

Drive to Forest Lake Memorial Lakeside Park and stay in your car! We’ll have a speaker so everyone will be able to hear and participate with their windows down. We’ll also have a creative Holy Communion experience.

Sun., April 10 at 10 a.m. Easter Worship

Watch the Easter worship video and use the plastic Easter egg with a surprise inside (provided in the Easter at Home Bag).

Benediction -David