

“Overcoming Evil with Goodness ‘  
Sermon by Rev. Debbie Vanover  
Sunday August 30, 2020 ~ Proper 17 Yr A  
St. Martin’s Episcopal Church, Lebanon, OR

God does watch out after the poor and suffering yet in the story of Moses which we heard read today we can see that the freedom of Israel was at the expense of others. Their freedom was at the expense of the Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites, Hittites, and the Ammonites. That is something that we don't think of frequently, how our freedoms and privileges often come at the expense of others.

We see it in the world today. In the Middle East: Palestine vs Israel, We see it in Afghanistan, in Africa in the myriad of refugees fleeing places in the middle east and South America. We see it on the streets of America and within our towns and borders. People desperate for a new life. One where hope can be stoked and a future is possible, one where the knee is not on the neck. Throughout all of human history this has been the case.

It is fair to say, I believe, that no culture or people has been free or is free from the use of violence in their endeavor to claim their freedoms to fulfill what might be seen as their unalienable rights. And it has cost the other, those conquered, those disenfranchised, those unseen cast aside masses. Yes so often the freedoms of some are gained on the backs of others. We see it in the Old testament story today. The Pharaoh, afraid Proper of the position and prestige of the Israelites, oppresses them, and they in turn received their special position with the kingdom from Joseph, at the expense of others.

Yes, If not nation to nation,  
Then tribe to tribe,  
Or family to family: Romeo and Juliet, what about abuse from parent to child or parent to parent.

Yes the use of Violence by some or one against others is universal. But the continuation of the cycle of violence and our participation in it is SIN, plain and simple.

Now we humans have at our fingertips innumerable justification that we can pull up which allows us to hide from our proclivity to such violence and restrictions on others freedom. Whether big or small, whether overt or merely in our hearts.

Yet as Christians we are to stand for something different. As people of hope and people of the resurrection we are to be people of transformation.

We are to live out, myself giving love to others. The truth of this action by this man Jesus broke the cycle of violence once and for all. Jesus did this by choosing the cross rather than the sword. He did it by turning the other cheek, but hanging between two law breakers on the cross.

Jesus did not overcome the violence within by calling upon the hosts of heaven for his deliverance but by drinking the bitter dregs of suffering offered to him by those he came to set free, by revealing the nature of the Godhead, pure and unadulterated love; Piercing, intense, demanding and liberating.

In that moment through his act of voluntary suffering we were given the good news that there is an Exodus from violence for all of humanity and a country where milk and honey can flow freely. Where dehumanization is not used to elevate ourselves, where we can learn to live in harmony.

Through Christ's suffering a redemptive path to freedom was set in motion.

The Gospel and reading in Romans today tells us the challenge of us calling ourselves "Christ Ones" who claim that we follow in the footsteps of the Prince of Peace.

Then the God spoken of in Exodus today reminds us that he hears the cry of his people, he knows their misery. He is the God of the oppressed, the imprisoned, the disenfranchised. He is the God of the orphan, the immigrant, the war displaced. He is the God of the hungry, the abused, the physically, emotionally, sexually and politically violated ones. And he hears their cries though every generation, even today.

Do YOU hear the anguish that is in our homeless and our mentally ill walking the streets of Lebanon? Do you see the anguish in those who come to us 3 times a week for the opportunity to be seen as "real, valued and precious children of God"? Are you aware of the anxiety and despondency of those who have lost their jobs and will soon be homeless as a consequence of this pandemic? Or are they to you faceless, voiceless ones .... the other?

How do you respond to the anguish that is plastered on every TV screen throughout the nation? From the unrest and racial and financial divide within our own country, cities and towns. And what about from around the world? From locusts destroying the crops in Eastern Africa and climate change causing heat waves that only intensify the loss and multiply the number who will actually, literally, REALLY die from starvation this year? Or again those in war torn countries where the rich get richer and the poor die and seek refuge by walking 100s of miles, taking life endangering chances on boats, seeking a better life and freedom to be and to live as a human being not a shackle.

It gets a bit much sometimes doesn't it? Just writing this and reading it is overwhelming. I know I sometimes cry, and hide my face and though at times I weep, and at other times seek to act as best as I can, I also go numb, for such is the overwhelming suffering all around and my seeming impotence in the face of it.

But Paul has something to say about this. He reminds us not to despair, but to keep our eyes on the God of hope and faithfulness.

He calls us to hate the evil and hold fast to the good:  
To rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep  
To persevere in prayer and DOING GOOD  
To love our enemies, and turn the other cheek  
To live peaceable as best we can with all persons  
AND  
To leave vengeance and judgement to God

Scripture tells us what the outcome of striving to live like this, like Jesus and the early disciples endeavored to do. We are reminded that suffering can be redemptive but it can also cause us discomfort. We are called to recognize that such is the reality of our taking up of our own cross as we lay our own desires aside to help the other.

In so doing the nature of Christ residing within us, is liberated and takes flight in the world, confronting the darkness with light. As we seek to live such lives we offer a new way of being, one that offers hope to the hopeless, and safely in the midst of danger. How we suffer with Christ in this world for the betterment of others is as different as we are. Our crosses are individually tailored to fit our specific needs and dimensions!! And yet suffering, when endeavoring to walk as Christ would in our world and neighborhood, can enrich our lives when we are surrendered to God.

For with God out of our suffering can come courage, compassion, a desire for justice and mercy, and witness to God's very being.

Though suffering in our world is the consequence of the human condition unbound to the will of God. I am not saying that our suffering is the prescription for overcoming the world's evil, nor is it a witness of the one who overcame and the investment God has in all people's wellbeing.

The dehumanization that can come through suffering from the hands of others or life in general is not to be worshipped or perpetuated. We should be compelled, when faced with this evil to endeavor to live lives as Paul calls us to in today's reading: We are to seek to live out of sincere love of others, passionately hating evil and clinging to what is good.

## Overcoming evil with Goodness

When our lives are lived out a life surrendered voluntarily to God, a life infused with the Holy Spirit our desire for or inordinate need for things, power, prestige, control and dominance, is surrendered and in its place we strive to live out of faithfulness, humility, perseverance, compassion and forgiveness. A place where love of our enemies undergirds our pursuit of justice.

Yes, we, like Moses, the prophets and saints of old and those bigger than life saints today, Martin Luther King, Elijah Cummings, Mother Teresa, are bearers of God's good news. But that is not all the saints, you and I are also saints and we can be bearers of the good news that violence against each other, and our mother Earth, the home and sustainer of us all, can be overcome.

As we walk with the one who said to Moses "I am who I am has sent me," let us remember that this I AM also sends us. We are to stand on this truth and with the Psalmist in faithful service and worship and:

Give thanks to the Lord

Call upon God's Name

Sing praises to God

Glory in God's name

Search for God's strength

Seek God's face to hear the voice of God

And we are always to

Remember the marvels God had done and that

God's Judgements and deeds among the people.

OR as Nan Merrill writes in her translation of Psalm 105 vs 1-6 says:

O give thanks to the Beloved, and open your hearts to Love.

Awaken! Listen in silence for the Voice of the Counselor.

Sing praises with a glad heart and give witness to the truth with your lives!

Glory in the radiance of the Beloved, let the hearts of those who call upon You rejoice!

Seek the One who is Life, your strength, walk harmoniously in Love's Presence!

Remember that you are not alone, for through Love doubt and fear are released:

O people of the earth, ever bear in mind

The unity of diversity in the

Divine Plan!

AMEN