

6 March 2024
Lent 3 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“40 for Life - Israel: God’s Discipline for Life”
Text: Deuteronomy 8:1-10; Hebrews 12:3-11, 18-24

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

40 days and 40 nights.

Actually, that sounds pretty good! *If* you’re Israel in the wilderness. 40 days and 40 nights was a long time for Noah to listen to the roar of the waters from inside the ark. 40 days and 40 nights was a long time for Moses to be on Mount Sinai, listening to the Lord. But 40 days and 40 nights for the people of Israel in the wilderness . . . that was a dream! They would have taken that in a heartbeat! What they got instead was 40 years.

That’s not how God planned it, of course. It only took a month - at most! - to go from Sinai to the border of the land the Lord promised to give them. The trouble started when they got there. Of the twelve spies they sent into Canaan, to spy it out, to see how they might go in, ten of the twelve told them not to go. The land was good, yes! Just as God had promised. But the people in it were too big. They were too powerful. The cities were too well fortified. Israel would be routed and wiped out! They were like grasshoppers compared to the people of the land (Numbers 13:33)!

So the people, filled with fear and trembling, rebelled. They forgot the mighty deeds God had done to bring them out of Egypt. They forgot how bad things were in Egypt and started making plans to abandon Moses and go back. And had it not been for Moses’ intercession for them, God would have wiped them out and started over with Moses and made of him a nation mightier and greater than Israel (Numbers 14:12). But Moses *did* intercede - not because the people deserved anything, but for the sake of God’s name, that it would not be profaned and belittled, as if God was unable to finish what He started.

So, God decided, 40 years. One year for each day the spies were in the land of Canaan. That’s how long the people would have to wait. That’s how long the people would have to live in the wilderness. That’s how long God would discipline them, to teach them to rely on Him and turn to Him. *And to trust Him*. It wasn’t what God had planned, but it was what His people needed. And a loving God would do no less. It would be **40 years from death to life**.

And yes, God was a loving God through it all. As we heard tonight, for 40 years He fed

them with manna. For 40 years their clothes did not wear out. For 40 years their feet did not swell. For 40 years God provided all they needed. God disciplined them, yes; but He also shepherded them. He remained with them. He led them and protected them. All for their good.

Did it have to be 40 years? Couldn't 40 months have done the trick? Perhaps. But as with Noah and Moses and their 40 days, this is the time of God's choosing. For this journey, from death to life. 40 years would reflect the greatness of His Fatherly love and His long-suffering. For again, as we heard: ***Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you.*** And discipline is love.

It doesn't always seem that way, though. As we heard in the reading from Hebrews: ***For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*** And this you know. From your own experience. As someone who has been disciplined, and perhaps as someone who has had to discipline another. Maybe you also know it from sports or music or another activity where you must discipline yourself - or have a coach or teacher do it - so that you make progress and improve. You also know it, perhaps, from your *Lenten* discipline, meant not as punishment for what you've done or not done, nor as payment to God, but as something to benefit you and strengthen you. It's not easy and often not pleasant, but it is good.

Discipline is different than punishment, though sometimes we use those terms interchangeably. Punishment has to do with repayment, with retribution. But discipline for teaching, training, improvement. Sometimes the two overlap, but not always. When it's happening to you, sometimes it's hard to tell them apart. But everything from your heavenly Father is meant for your good. And the punishment you deserve? Because you do! That is here (pointing to the cross). Jesus took that for you, in your place, so you are forgiven. But your Father will still discipline you, because He loves you. So that, as we heard, ***we may share his holiness.***

Israel needed a long discipline. It took them a long time to unlearn bad habits and wrong thinking. They had ups and downs. One step forward was often followed by two steps back. But through it all their Father was working for them and in them, to help them.

And so, too, for you. *How is God disciplining you?* I know things in my own life that have not been pleasant, and sometimes downright frightening! But in the end, good for me. Things that I can now look back and pray a prayer of thanks. Then? At the time? Maybe not! But now, yes. My Father was rescuing me and turning me and saving me with His discipline. And your Father loves you enough to do that and keep doing that, even if it takes 40 years. Because at the end of your journey through this world, He wants life for you.

And it is the cross that is our focus this Lenten season that shows us that relentless love of God for us. Apart from the cross - either looking forward to it in the Old Testament or looking back to it in these New Testament times - apart from the cross, we could not know the difference between the punishment of God and the discipline of God. We could not be sure. And an unknown God is frightening. That's why all other religions, which really don't know the true God, the God of love, are always trying to appease Him and make Him like them. It is an endless task, and one you can never be sure you've accomplished.

But when we look to the cross, when we fix our eyes on Jesus, we know who God is and His love for us. We know that we cannot appease Him, *and that we don't have to*. That has been done. The Lamb of God has taken away the sin of the world. So what we, who are in Christ Jesus, are receiving now is good. All good. Every good. Even when that good is discipline. And of that we can be confident. The resurrection the sign and seal of that.

So again, as we heard in the reading from Hebrews, we do not live at Mount Sinai, the terrifying sight, trembling with fear in the presence of God. We live at Mount Zion, with the innumerable angels, the festal gathering, the church of the forgiven, and of those who have been sprinkled by the ***blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel***. For the blood we've been sprinkled with, the blood of Jesus, cries out not for vengeance, but for our forgiveness. The forgiveness He earned and won and now gives to us. That we journey not from life to death, but from death to life. And if we need His discipline on the way? God's discipline for life? Then thank You, Father, for loving me enough to do that. And not just these 40 days of Lent, but until You bring me home.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.