

Let us pray... Eternal God, gather your Spirit in this place. Open our hearts and minds so we may find you in all that we do. Guide our journey together, with you at the center. Amen.

Many years ago, my sister, Meredith and I experienced a week in the Boundary Waters.

We were told to pack light, because we would be carrying our packs, gear, food, and even our canoes.

And because of this, my sister and I took our order to pack light, seriously, bringing just the bare essentials...

We thought everyone else would do the same, but most did not... And since two people were sharing one pack, some packs were significantly heavy... And so, the Maggie and Meredith pack quickly became the desired one to carry.

Whereas the heavier packs and the canoes were less desirable.

But all of them had to be carried, as it was part of the journey we were on.

And so, at every portage we picked up our bags and canoes and hiked to the next body of water...

And by the end of the week, we had covered a significant distance... A journey that was awesome, hard, tiring, rejuvenating, and beyond words.

Which is like most journeys... As most journeys are never straightforward, and come with their fair share of challenges.

And some journeys are significantly harder than others...

Case in point, our gospel today... Jesus shares that he is about to embark on a horrific journey... One filled with suffering, rejection, and death...

And he doesn't gloss over any details... Instead, Jesus looks pain and suffering right in the eye, and acknowledges what needs to be done...

Making this a harsh Gospel to hear. Which has led to many different interpretations, some of which are not helpful... Especially the ones that glorify suffering, or that justify the suffering of others.

This is not what Jesus was saying...

Instead, Jesus knows that pain and suffering are real. Because Jesus experienced it himself.

And because of this, he wanted to bring pain and suffering to an end, especially since pain and suffering are not a part of God's plan... But are a reality in life.

And because this is our reality, Jesus knows it best to name it... To name evil, pain, and fear.

By naming them, they no longer have a hold over you...

By looking pain or fear right in the eye, you refuse to let that pain or fear structure your life, define who you are, or motivate how you live.

It may not take away your pain or your fear, but by acknowledging it, you free its grip on you, allowing you to live life more fully...

Following Christ is not an invitation into suffering, but is an invitation to stop the suffering.

Which is exactly what Christ came to do. Christ came so that we could live life fully, by bringing an end to suffering and death...

And Christ did this by standing up against the forces of evil, oppression, and hate... A journey that we are called to, as we follow him.

A journey that is especially intentional during the season of Lent...

As Lent is often described as a journey to the cross.

But it is not just a journey to the cross... It is also a journey to Easter morning and Christ's resurrection... As the resurrection changes everything.

Take if you will Scripture, and specifically, the Gospels... The Gospels were written many years after Christ's resurrection.

Meaning, the Gospels were written in light of the resurrection.

As Christ's resurrection impacts the past, present, and future. It is how we understand God. And it grounds our very lives in the strange reality of now and not yet...

Which makes sense since no journey is ever linear, despite the fact that we think of time as linear... Our memories of the past influence what we think will happen in the future.

And the future also impacts our present, as we live with hope in what is yet to come...

Which means that if we stop at the cross, and just focus on suffering, we only get half the story, and we miss the good news of Easter.

As Dr. Karoline Lewis warns, "Don't put all your eggs in the crucifixion basket."

Because putting all your eggs in one place, especially one of despair is not helpful, nor is it the whole truth...

Which is similar to what my sister and I discovered on our boundary waters trip...

The pack that we carried made a difference. But all of the packs were part of our journey... And we had to carry all of them at different times...

And acknowledging this was freeing. It gave us strength to endure the heavier packs, and the opportunity to lighten the load of someone who was really struggling by giving them the Maggie and Meredith pack.

It allowed us to continue on every day, especially knowing our journey would soon end... Allowing us to live into each moment the best we could.

And that is what God wants for us as we journey... God wants us to live life fully, filled with good memories and love, even while we live in a world where that reality doesn't always exist.

Which is why Christ came to lead us... Not just to the cross, but to the hope that lives in the resurrection and beyond.

Every day Christ invites us to carry our cross in light of this resurrection hope. As carrying our cross this way, reveals that we are not defined by our pain, suffering, or loss...

Instead, we are loved by a God who leads us every day. As Jesus says in John 10:10, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came so that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

This is how we are called to follow Jesus. Doing our part to end destruction, hatred, and oppression. So, all people may live life fully... It is time to share the load... It is time to name what we carry... It is time to place our trust in a living God... Amen.