

“Saved through the Struggle?” // Lent 1 // *Blessed Hunger, Holy Feast*  
Joe Heikman // Wildwood Mennonite Church // March 10, 2019



I feel like I should warn you that there's at least a slight chance that I don't know what I'm talking about today.

Many of you are not surprised by this. :) Thanks, I love you, too. I don't know why exactly you keep showing up and listening to me on Sundays, but I'm glad you're here.

But even more than usual, I'm feeling out of my depth today, because the theme I'm talking about is struggle. And in the grand scheme of things, I do not struggle very much. In the typical things that many people go through in life, I have not had to face the worst of them. I have my own stuff to deal with, but it's not the same as yours and I'm certainly not an expert here. So I feel like I'm standing in the shallow end of the pool, preaching to folks in here and out there that may have been in the deep end and indeed may be there this very moment, swimming or sinking.

If that's you, I would love to talk about that sometime, to learn from you and to do what I can to help. If anything.

The reason I'm talking about struggling today is because of the season of Lent. Lent is all about struggle. The journey to the cross. The wilderness experience.

Again, let's be clear that there are different kinds of struggles. For many of us, Lent is a season of intentional struggles, a kind of suffering that we choose in the hopes that it will make us a better person. Like Crossfit. Or winter in Saskatchewan.

We “give up” things for Lent, or take on extra prayers or readings or other spiritual disciplines, and those things are meant to bring us closer to God. That's a kind of struggle, a difficult journey that we choose for a purpose.

There's also the kind of struggle that is forced on us. Dealing with suffering and pain. Personal and relational hardship, collective tragedies, oppression, grief and loss. All of that really heavy stuff that we don't choose but have to deal with, that is all wrapped up in what I'm talking about as struggle today.

I'm casting a pretty large net with that definition, and there are definitely extremes there. But I think there's some commonality in all of those experiences.

In Lent, the metaphor for all kinds of struggle is the wilderness journey. Lent is a season of 40-ish days, recalling the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness as told in the gospel reading we've heard. And that 40-day experience also recalls the 40-ish years that the ancient Hebrews spent in the wilderness around the Sinai Peninsula, the Exodus journey.

This story happens in three parts:

Stage One, God's people are in bondage, slavery, in Egypt. Life is hard, and though they've done all they can, they can't save themselves. So they call out to God, and God hears their cry and comes down to rescue them.

Stage Two is the wilderness journey. They leave Egypt and they meet God in the desert. It's long, and hard, and there are a lot of obstacles and a lot of lessons to be learned, but that's kind of the point. And even though they feel like giving up, they keep going because of the promise of...

Stage Three, the Promised Land. For the Hebrews, that was the ultimate destination, their inheritance, the place where they would be free to live and serve God in the way that God intended. *Shalom*, nothing missing, nothing broken, the just and good society.

Out of Egypt, on the wilderness journey, and then into the realization of God's goodness.

That's the archetype, *the* story for the Judeo-Christian worldview. As humans we find ourselves in some kind of bondage: sin, ignorance, naivety (Naïve-Et-Y), oppression by outside forces. We cry out for help, and God hears us. God rescues us by leading us on some kind of journey, and we end up in a better place or perhaps as better people in a similar place.



When the Bible talks about salvation, that's the pattern it's usually referring to. And while Christians interpret the specifics of that very differently, that's usually what we have in mind when we think about being saved.

So that's what I have in mind when I think about Lent. Lent is when we focus on the middle part, the wilderness experience. The struggle.

Here again, there are different ways to think about the role of struggle in this story of salvation.

I've come up with three.

First, there is the idea that salvation means being saved *from* the struggle. Struggle is negative, it's bad, and God will or at least wants to save us from it.

The Psalm for this week, Psalm 91, promises exactly that:

*Because you have made the Lord your refuge,  
the Most High your dwelling place,  
no evil shall befall you,  
no scourge come near your tent.*

...

*Those who love me, I will deliver;  
I will protect those who know my name.  
When they call to me, I will answer them;  
I will be with them in trouble,  
I will rescue them and honor them.  
With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.*

~Psalm 91

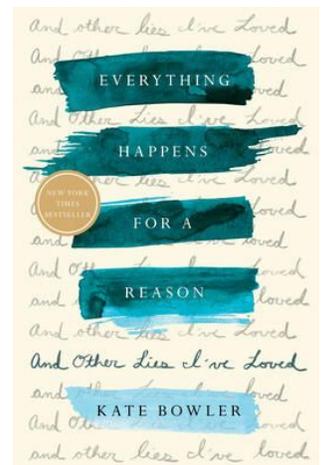
I loved that Psalm as a kid. I had big fears, mostly of bad guys jumping out from behind the trees on our farm lane to grab me. *No evil shall befall you, I will protect those who know my name.*

That sounds pretty good, no? If we trust in God, God will take care of us. No suffering, suffering is just part of the problem that God wants to rescue us from.

Sophisticated Christians like me sometimes dismiss this kind of thing as “prosperity theology” or “the health-and-wealth gospel.”

(Aside: for some serious consideration of the promises of the prosperity gospel movement, set in a moving memoir of the author’s sudden struggle with incurable stage 4 cancer, I highly recommend [Everything Happens for a Reason \(and other lies I've loved\)](#) by [Kate Bowler](#))

But this longing for this kind of protection and blessing, the kind that takes us away from the wilderness, that runs deep. That hope and promise is ancient.



A second way to look at the salvation journey is to be saved *by* struggle.

Remember my first year in this church, the time when we gave up singing for Lent? Hands-down my favourite Lent experience. It was a miserable way to do church for six weeks! Each Sunday, we replaced one more song with silence, so that by the sixth Sunday of Lent, our usual 5 songs throughout the service were replaced with about twenty minutes of silence. It was so strange and awkward.

Not my best idea, I'll gladly admit that. And I love you for giving it a try, anyway. And some people will even now say that the experience was worth it, because the absence of singing made them appreciate it all that much more when it came back.

That's how Lent is supposed to work, right? That's the idea most of us have, we “give up something” like coffee or chocolate or social media or whatever, and that discipline will help us to enjoy that thing more in the end

when we bring it back. Or maybe the absence of the chocolate will make space for healthier food choices, and so that will help me enjoy other aspects of food more.

This kind of struggle changes us for the better, and so even though it's painful, it's worth it in the end. That's how most of us experience Lent, I think--as our theme for this year says, it's a "blessed hunger" because it leads us to a "holy feast."

But here, I wonder about the struggles that we do not choose. Do those things also make us stronger and better? I've lived with periods of mild depression at various times in my life. Am I a better person for having gone through that? And if so, does that improvement in my life now justify the struggle back then?

And what if the depression never lifts? What if my struggle doesn't end, but only leads to more struggle?

Even with the original story of the Exodus, the struggle doesn't end when the people get to the Promised Land. Instead, they are asked to risk more, to deal with more conflicts, to face more failures and corruption. Their dream of *shalom*, the kingdom of peace and justice, that never happened!

What is the meaning of the wilderness experience when the Promised Land is not all that it's cracked up to be?

And further, how does God fit into this story of salvation by our struggles? Does God cause our struggles in order to make us grow? Some Christians say that's exactly how it works. But I don't find that that does justice to the depths of the suffering of the people that I know, much less to the entire history of the world.

I'm not writing this off, I'm just saying that we need to be careful with where it takes us. If Lent is only about making Easter that much more enjoyable, maybe we're missing something?

## Lent: What do we do with our struggles?

### *1. Saved from struggle.*

God will/wants to take our conflict and pain away.

### *2. Saved by struggle.*

God will/wants to use conflict and pain to make us better.

### *3. Saved in struggle.*

God is with us in the struggle, regardless of outcome or resolution.

Egypt/Captivity → Wilderness → The Promised Land

Finally, there's what I'm calling salvation *in* struggle. In the first two, the focus is on the end of the journey, the Promised Land, the paradise where everything is made to be okay.

I think Jesus flips that script.

As I've said, Jesus was also playing out this story in his life through his own wilderness journey. And when that ended, when the struggle with the devil was through, what happened next?

In [Luke's version of the story](#), Jesus went back to his hometown, went into the local place of worship, and read what was a very well-known piece from the prophet Isaiah:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

That's the language of the Promised Land! That's shalom, the year of God's favour. The great hope of the future.

And then, Jesus said. *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* Today. Not, "hey, I'm working on this project, and after a bit I'll be crucified and then I'll rise again and that will make it possible for you to enter the Promised Land sometime after you're dead."

Today. As Mark's gospel puts it, "The Kingdom of God is at hand!" Now, already.

Jesus didn't end their struggles. Even by the most generous accounting, Jesus only healed a small minority of those who were ill. He did not make his disciples wealthy, he did not settle their conflicts, he did not kick out the Romans, he did not fix the corruption of the religious establishment. He pushed back against all of those things, but he didn't fix any of them.

And yet, the Kingdom of God was already at hand. And yet, Jesus was convinced that God was still present in the middle of the struggle. Jesus' followers became convinced that Jesus *was* the divine presence, even though he struggled and wept and got pushed away and arrested and killed.

Jesus did not save himself, or others, *from* the struggle, not most of the time.

It's really easy to miss that. I'm really good at avoiding discomfort and pain, and so I can easily twist Jesus' life and teachings to suit that.

It's really easy to imagine Jesus as kind of creating this little bubble of joy and comfort in the middle of the harsh realities of life in the first century. Sure, his followers were mostly broke and homeless, but hey, they were with Jesus so there was this happy little fellowship of friends wandering around enjoying God's presence.

That's kind of how I treat God in my own life as well, like a buffer to the struggles. War and starvation in Yemen? "God help them, because I surely cannot." You're grieving the loss of a loved one? "I'll pray for you." And I will. But that's also a way of keeping my distance from this situation that makes me uncomfortable. Facing death in my own family? "Well... God will give me strength to get through it..." "

I'm not making light of that. We should pray for each other, and for peace in Yemen. And God does give us the strength to get through things.

But if all we're doing is gritting our teeth until we make it through the wilderness to the other side, I think we're missing something.

The Kingdom of God is *at hand*, Jesus said. There truly was salvation at the beginning of the story, not just at the end.

There is salvation *in* the struggle itself. Not beyond the struggles, but in them.

Is it still cool to get tattoos? I want to get this on a tattoo. (I'll accept your design suggestions, but only if you're younger than me.)

"The struggle for what you want *is* what you want."  
~ Peter Rollins

That's a quote from Christian philosopher Peter Rollins. I'm not entirely sure what it means, which is part of why I like it.

To me it says two things.

One, struggle does not need to be redeemed. It is not inherently negative, it's something that I might even *want* in my life. Not too much, but some.

That's counter to my expectations of life in the 21st century. *Suffering is bad, Pain is bad, thank God for ibuprofen. We're supposed to be past this already.* But this season of Lent reminds us that God and suffering are not mutually exclusive.

That's a big part of why I'm a follower of Jesus--his life is witness to the presence of God right in the middle of human suffering. God is on the cross, right there with us. Perhaps we'll unpack that later in this season.

And two, struggle is not something that we can expect to be resolved. And maybe that's okay.

As I've said, I've struggled through several periods of mild depression in my life. Mostly those have been circumstantial--big changes, lots of stress. And I go into a kind of self-preservation mode. (I'm sure some of you have heard this before.) When life starts to fill with the possibilities of big ups and downs, I try to control the size of the waves. And usually, I do that by cutting off the top--if I don't try to go too high, then I don't have so far to fall.

The trouble with that is that is that I start to shrink. And then fade downward off the chart. Avoiding the struggle does not save me from falling. Embracing the struggle doesn't either, and it also doesn't guarantee that I'll feel better at the highs.

The struggle is its own thing. It's not only good when it resolves, it's good in itself because it is life. Life is in the trying and failing and feeling, even the painful stuff. When I try to avoid those feelings of struggle, or even just endure them, I miss out on life.

*The struggle for what you want is what you want.* Maybe the wilderness is not just something we journey through on our way to something better. Maybe the struggle is part of what makes life meaningful. Maybe the wilderness is where we're meant to be?

I can't answer that for you. I'm not sure enough about it myself to get that tattoo just yet.

But that's where I'm going to leave it for today. Another one of those sermons where Sunday morning comes before I have figured everything out. Come back next week, I guess. :)

In the meantime, may you meet God in your wilderness experiences. I truly hope that God saves you from genuine hardship, and that your struggles do indeed bring character and integrity. But even when they are not, God is with you. You are never alone in your struggle. Amen.