

March 14, 2021 – Numbers 21:4-9

There are certain events in the course of history that cause us to say, “Never forget.” Franklin Roosevelt called December 7th, 1941 and the bombing of Pearl Harbor, “a day which will live in infamy.” Never forget. Texans have their well-known expression, “Remember the Alamo!” Never forget. And, more recently, the September 11th attack on the World Trade Center has generated countless images and videos. Each one emblazoned with those words: Never forget.

It's such a common sentiment regarding important, often tragic events, that I think it bears consideration. I mean, “never” is a strong word. When you give a child an instruction and then you tell them, “Never forget this!” Well, that better have been something pretty important you just said, because it's going to leave an impression. So what do we hope to accomplish by saying, “Never forget?”

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying it's necessarily a bad thing. If you're saying, “Never forget... that life is short. And frail. And you could die at a moment's notice. So you better be right with your Lord.” Then I would say it's a good thing. On the other hand, if you're saying, “Never forget... who did this to us. And how much we hate them. And how we will never, ever let that anger go.” Well then, 'never forget' isn't a very Christian thing to say at all.

Truth be told, events like Pearl Harbor and the Alamo and the Twin Towers have become symbols. Symbols that, at least for our generation, we will never forget. But why we remember them is different for every person.

The same is true of the cross. The cross is a symbol. A symbol that a great many people look at daily. A symbol you could very easily put in an image with the words “never forget” written under it. And people would see it and nod in agreement. And share it on their Facebook page. And no one would really think about... why? Why should we never forget?

You might be surprised how much disagreement you'd get over that question. Especially if you step out of our own time and place and ask it over the centuries. For a Roman living in Jesus' day, the cross was a symbol of execution. But it was also a symbol of Roman might and power. Roman justice and Roman pride. Whereas, for a Jew living at the same time, it was likewise a symbol of execution, but also a symbol of Roman injustice. Of Roman oppression. Of hatred. Of rebellion and revolution.

Fast-forward a thousand years and the cross takes on another meaning. A political meaning. The cross is the symbol of the Holy Roman Empire. It is the banner under which Charlemagne and his successors rule. It is emblazoned on the shield of every crusader marching to the holy land.

Move forward another 600-800 years and you're into the era of the Reformation. Of the founding of Calvinism and Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses. Who all view images of Jesus dying on the cross as idols. Graven images. Conceived of and spread by a corrupt Church that must be cleansed of all it's false doctrines. A belief they still hold to this day, I might add.

And today? Well, unfortunately, for many people today the cross has no meaning at all. It's a fashion accessory. Worn by people who have barely even heard of the crucifixion, let alone put any meaning into it. Or, maybe worse yet, it's a source of superstition. A good luck charm that guarantees some nameless deity's help in whatever selfish pursuit you'd like its blessing upon.

And while we may disagree with all these perspectives, the fact that they exist should make us ask, “What does the cross mean to me?” If we're going to hold up the cross as this ultimate symbol of Christianity and point to it and say, “Never forget,” then we also need to be able answer, “Why?” Why must we never forget? What must we never forget?

But to begin, I'm actually not going to start with the cross today or even the cross of the crucifixion. I'm going to go back to a time before there even was a cross. Before there were Romans or Jews or even Christians. I'm going to go back to Moses.

We read about Moses in our Old Testament lesson today. And it's a pretty common scene that we're confronted with. The Israelites are complaining. Shocking. Based on the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, you kinda get the impression that that's all they do.

And this particular incident basically amounts to them saying, "Are we there yet?" They're at the end of 40 years of wandering. They are approaching the borders of Canaan.

And right at the finish line, they have to make a detour. A detour that will take them an extra six months to complete. Now, of course, six months compared to 40 years is nothing. But an extra six months when you're ready to be done with a 40 year journey is an eternity.

They're frustrated. And they're feeling abandoned. God had said that at the end of 40 years they would be allowed to enter the Promised Land. But now they have to wait even longer.

Which has got them asking, "Is He really there at all?" Does He really care what they do? Could they have avoided a lot of time and hassle and just gone straight into the Promised Land from the very beginning? Could the old Egyptian gods maybe have gotten them there faster?

God doesn't appreciate this kind of talk. And so He sends a punishment. Snakes. Fiery snakes, the Bible says. Fiery either because of how their bite felt. Or fiery because they were literally on fire. God does occasionally have a flare for the dramatic, after all. Regardless, the snake bites are deadly. Not immediately fatal, but eventually people start to die.

And the Israelites realize that they have just spoken against the one true God. They have just insulted the One with power over life and death and all creation. And there is only way that they are getting into the Promised Land. And that's God's way.

And so having heard their repentant cries for mercy, God relents. He tells Moses to make a snake, a bronze snake, and put it on a pole. And anyone who looks at it will live.

Now this bronze snake could have been a symbol of a lot of things. It could have been a symbol of death. It was snakes that were killing them, after all. It could have been a symbol of God's wrath. He had sent these snakes in punishment for their doubt and disbelief. It could have been a symbol of sin and failure and uncleanness. For it was the sin and failure and uncleanness of their hearts that had brought this plague upon them.

But, instead, for the people who look on it and live, it's not any of those things. For them, the bronze snake is a symbol of life. Of hope. Of love. Of a God who punishes, yes, but also a God who relents. Who has mercy and compassion and infinite grace. And who still has a plan to bring them one day into His Promised Land, even if it takes a little longer than they'd prefer.

Jesus tells us in John 3 that He is a bronze snake for us. And the cross is the pole that he will be hung upon. And the cross can be a symbol of a lot of things. Of death. Of God's wrath poured out on His Son. Of our sin and failure and uncleanness that sent our Lord to the grave.

But instead, for the people who look on the cross and live, it's not any of these things. For them, the cross is a symbol of life. Of hope. Of love. Of a God who punishes, yes, but also a God who relents. Who has mercy and compassion and infinite grace. And who still has a plan to bring you one day into His Promised Land, even if it takes a little longer than you'd prefer.

For, as Jesus says, *“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”* The cross could easily have been a symbol of our sin and failure and God's condemnation. But it's not. It's a symbol that tells us that God so loves this sinful world that he gave us his one and only Son, that whoever looks upon him – believes in him – should not perish but have eternal life.

We look at the cross and we say, “Never forget,” because, like the bronze serpent, the cross is a symbol of God's promise. When Moses put the serpent on the pole, God promised that those who looked upon it would live and they did. Just as He had promised to bring them out of Egypt. To bring them to the Promised Land. To make them a great nation, more numerous than the stars in the sky.

When Jesus hung on the cross for us, God promised that those who looked to His Son would live. And we do. Just as he has promised that He will send His Spirit to be with us. That He will be with us to the very end of the age. That He will give us rebirth in Holy Baptism. That He will feed us with heavenly bread and living water. That he will give to us his very body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. That He will draw all people to Himself and will resurrect them on the last day.

God has made a lot of promises. The cross is a symbol of all those promises. It is a symbol of all those promises made and all those promises fulfilled. And it is those promises to us, that we never, ever forget. Amen.