

WELCOME

(Introduce yourself - Sonya Brown, part of the preaching team, whatever you want to say!)

We can all think of symbols that are significant to us, our culture, and communities we are part of. There are symbols that are recognized on a national and global level as well. You see a golden arch and you know there's a McDonalds. A red cross usually identifies humanitarian aid medical treatment. Symbols are significant from what we read in books and in movies. An example is the three finger salute by Katniss Everdeen in the Hunger Games. Katniss holds up three fingers to the camera after the passing of Rue and you see District 11 hold up three fingers as well. This gesture became a symbol throughout the series. This three finger salute more recently has become a symbol of resistance and solidarity for the democracy movement across south-east Asia.

Sometimes symbols can change meaning. The swastika symbol has a negative association and is desecrated by Hitler and his Nazis regime. In my Navajo culture, this symbol is the whirling log that represents well being, good luck, and protection. You could find this symbol on artwork, baskets, Navajo rugs and blankets, and clothing prior to World War II.

We also can recognize symbols when we read Scripture. The dove symbolizes the Holy Spirit during Jesus' baptism. The dove also represents peace during Advent and the Christmas season. We may have ornaments of this to adorn our tree or cards during this season. There's the symbol of the pillar of cloud and fire from Exodus that represents God's guidance for the people of Israel. The symbols within Scripture are significant when we understand why they have meaning. The symbol of the cross is recognized worldwide. Even if you don't know much about Scripture or who Jesus is, you usually know when you see a cross on a building, it's most likely a church. Or, if you see someone wearing a cross, they're most likely a believer of Christ.

But the cross has also been a symbol of terror. European soldiers marched under the banner of the cross during the crusades. The KKK burns crosses to terrorize people of color. More broadly, we as Christians are not always known for looking like Jesus. In a Barna poll from 2007 found that younger generations see Christians as judgmental, hypocritical, too political, anti-gay and more. For them, the Cross is not a symbol of liberation and life.

Today, the symbol of significance we are going to focus on is the cross of Christ crucified. We will journey together to understand the purpose of the cross and how it is the symbol of hope and love for the church. And we'll see how we can turn that symbol of terror into an invitation to life!

Message

Welcome to CataVision! This summer, we're exploring some of our most beloved television shows. Why? Because we're practicing listening well and creating spiritual conversations.

The shows we're engaging have been popular, which indicates they resonate with us. There's something about them that connects with us - not just as individuals, but at a cultural level. So this summer, we're going to ask, "Why?" What message in these shows is resonating? And how do we engage that message in a faith-filled way?

So that's what we're doing this summer: first, listening to the show and second, responding in faith. A couple of weeks ago, we saw how the Mandalorian illustrated the difference between legalism and love. And last week, Ted Lasso inspired us to be kind at any cost.

[FWS Shield] In this episode of CataVision we're going to talk about the show The Falcon and The Winter Soldier. This series is part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and takes place after the movie Avengers: Endgame. The Falcon, also known as Sam Wilson, has a great background. He's from Harlem and a community organizer. His father was a minister. The Falcon was trained by Captain America. He's also Captain America's longest partner and one of the few people he trusts. Comics are interesting because they tackle current issues and changes. The Falcon and the Winter Soldier is timely for what has occurred over the past year. The show challenged us to look at race, racial injustice, and question this idea of who is our neighbor and who is our enemy. Most importantly, the show made you think about what the shield of Captain America represented and what it meant for him to pass on the mantle of Captain America to Sam Wilson, The Falcon.

Sam continues to assist the US military with rescue operations, but he doesn't feel comfortable carrying Steve's shield. He decides to place the shield in the museum that honors Captain America. The speech Sam gives before turning over the shield sets the series and helps us to understand the significance the shield symbolizes. Sam describes Steve Rogers as, "courageous, righteous, hopeful." Because of him, "the world has been forever changed." Sam also explains, "we need new heroes, one suited for the times we're in... symbols are nothing without the women and men that give them meaning... and this thing," Sam picks up the shield... "I don't know if there's ever been a greater symbol, but it's more about the man that propped it up and he's gone."

Later in the series, Sam discovers the government experimented on black Americans to create super soldiers. He meets Isaiah Bradley, one of those black super soldiers. Bradley insists that no self-respecting black man would want to be Captain America because of how America has treated black people. For men like Bradley, the history of the shield is more complicated.

Sam has so much to process as he considers whether he'll take up the mantle as Captain America and carry that symbolic shield..

Symbols are complicated. We undermine the meaning of symbols when we don't weave the story and symbol together. Listening and understanding provides revelation. There is more to the history and representation of the shield that Captain America carried. Sam learns more about the injustice and racism that is behind the stars and stripes of the shield and this country. Isaiah Bradley discusses how people of color fought for this country, returned home, and found crosses burning on their lawn. Despite being a super soldier, racism and cover ups still plagued the U.S. government. The Black community knows all too well the nightmares of legal lynchings that were used by the state and federal government. And unfortunately, the Christian cross was used to intimidate, bring fear, and to death to the Black community. The biblical symbols have cultural and religious meaning. The cross has a complicated meaning.

The cross is a visual symbol that is used in Christianity. It's interesting how the cross was known for its shameful and cruel executions. The cross is now a universal symbol that is associated with Jesus. Dr. John R.W. Stott discusses how there are various possibilities of symbols and something less offensive that Christians could have chosen, "But instead the chosen symbol came to a simple cross... They wished to commemorate as central to their understanding of Jesus neither his birth nor his youth, neither his teaching nor his service, neither his resurrection nor his reign, nor his gift of the Spirit, but his death, his crucifixion." (2006:27) Symbols are important. Unfortunately, if we don't know the history or meaning of a symbol, it's just an object or a thing. As Sam explains, "symbols are nothing without the women and men that give them meaning." The cross has no meaning of hope if we don't understand what Christ did. Let us see how the cross is a sign and proclamation of hope and faith.

Turn with us to Matthew 27:32-44

This Biblical passage is the climax of the Passion story. The false charges of Jesus' attempt to claim kingship over the Jews and thus bring trouble to the Roman rule and other allegations were brought by the chief priests to Pontus Pilate. We read about Jesus' abandonment by his followers and his betrayal by one of his disciples. We also read about innocent Jesus' beating, suffering, and impending death on the cross. The crucifixion on a cross is horrific, slow, deliberate, painful, and humiliating. Death on the cross was often reserved for those who were criminals, slaves, or rebels who threatened public order against the nation state.

The Roman Empire used the cross as a public reminder of their military and imperial power. Crucifixions were a public reminder to the people of Israel that Rome occupied their land. Crucifixions were done publicly to serve as a visual warning to those who challenged the authority of the state or Roman government - they were like the Roman version of reality TV.

In other words, in Jesus' day, the cross was already a symbol. It was a symbol of Rome's divine right to rule the world, a symbol of the brutal inevitability of their military might. A symbol of the hopelessness of trying to resist them.

Despite all the mockery, false claims, and injustice, Matthew portrays Jesus as the obedient Son of God and his fulfillment of Scripture.

“Along the way, they came across a man named Simon, who was from Cyrene, and the soldiers forced him to carry Jesus' cross. And they went out to a place called Golgotha (which means 'Place of the Skull'). The soldiers gave Jesus wine mixed with bitter gall, but when he had tasted it, he refused to drink it.

After they had nailed him to the cross, the soldiers gambled for his clothes by throwing dice. Then they sat around and kept guard as he hung there. A sign was fastened above Jesus' head, announcing the charge against him. It read: 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.' Two revolutionaries were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left.

The people passing by shouted abuse, shaking their heads in mockery. 'Look at you now!' they yelled at him. 'You said you were going to destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days. Well then, if you are the Son of God, save yourself and come down from the cross!'

The leading priests, the teachers of religious law, and the elders also mocked Jesus. 'He saved others,' they scoffed, 'but he can't save himself! So he is the King of Israel, is he? Let him come down from the cross right now, and we will believe in him! He trusted God, so let God rescue him now if he wants him! For he said, 'I am the Son of God.'” Even the revolutionaries who were crucified with him ridiculed him in the same way.” -- Matthew 27:32-44 (NLT)

This passage of Jesus' suffering, crucifixion, and death is often read about or heard in sermons around Good Friday. The cross is much different than probably what's displayed in churches, homes, and what we wear as jewelry.

Yet somehow, this brutal, bloody Roman cross became a symbol of hope and reconciliation for the church. Dr. James Cone explains the cross, “is a paradoxical religious symbol because it inverts the world's value system with the news that hope comes by way of defeat, that suffering and death do not have the last word, that the last shall be first and the first last.” (2011:2) So just as we discussed with Stranger Things that we need to see the world as God sees it. We must have an upside down way or invert how we see this world and how we are to participate in this world to have God's kingdom come to light.

Unfortunately when we don't "invert the world's value system" or we don't have "an upside down way of seeing God's kingdom come to light in this world;" the cross is used to harm the vulnerable and preserve order. The Roman Empire used the public torture and humiliation of the cross and crucifixion as punishment for law breakers and rebels. This was a public service announcement to show the legacy and strength of Roman Imperialism. This was their way to send a message to the people of their inferiority and powerlessness.

[FWS Cross Tree - keep up till end of second paragraph] Dr. James Cone draws the comparison of the cross and the lynching tree of how they "were symbols of terror, instruments of torture and execution, reserved primarily for slaves, criminals, and insurrectionists - the lowest of the low in society." (2011:31) This symbol of the cross is most significant for the black community due to the pain and violence of racism they have endured in the United States. It's difficult to comprehend. I ask you to stay with me as we come to understand when the cross symbolizes and comes to represent those that commit harm. But, God calls us to invert our understanding of the cross to represent His son, the crucified Jesus and the very good news of hope he brings.

Jesus knew what the cross meant. Jesus was a Jewish, brown man, born on the wrong side of the tracks in Nazareth. We know that he was an immigrant when his family had to escape to Egypt. Jesus changed social structures. He chose to hang out with the weak, marginalized, outcast, least of these. Jesus broke social and religious rules to heal others and because he was loving. Jesus was a teacher. He became our Savior. Jesus gave new meaning to the cross. Jesus took a symbol of Roman terror and turned it upside down. As the Roman cross holds God's broken body, it becomes a symbol of hope and the divine power of God overcoming the power of sin and death. Christ Jesus has brought new meaning to the cross.

Captain America's shield was given meaning by Steve Rogers. It wasn't by what Captain America said about the shield, it was how he lived his life that brought meaning to the shield. Steve Rogers was a frail and physically weak young man. He willingly volunteers for military service and came part of a military project to become Captain America. He became a symbol of what America can achieve. His friend Sam describes him as, "courageous, righteous, hopeful." This is the meaning Steve Rogers brought to the shield.

The cross is given meaning by Jesus. Jesus constantly committed himself to God's way. We're prepared in Scripture of what this looks like. There's this lived out love Jesus showed for his three years of ministry. Towards the end, Jesus expresses and explains, he must suffer and die; Scripture must be fulfilled of what is written about the Messiah; and Jesus knew that it was his choice to take up this mantle to do his Father's will and finish the work to overcome sin and death.

[FWS Walker] What happens when the meaning of a symbol is not carried on? You see in episode one of the show the US government assigned John Walker as the New Captain America out of fear and vulnerability. We hear from his closest friend that John Walker has anger issues and this is revealed in the show. Sadly, the new Captain America sees his role as a job. We come to find out in episode four where the New Captain America, John Walker, doesn't carry on the meaning of the shield and it ends in a person's gruesome death and the shield being covered in blood.

When we think of the cross... What does it mean to us as the body of Christ? Has the cross become an ornate symbol we wear or safely display in our homes and churches? Or is the cross something we bear and take up daily? Jesus knew and the people who lived under Roman rule knew exactly what the cross meant under an oppressive and unjust system. When we stop wearing our cross and take up the cross, we are told in Matthew 16:24-28 what that looks like:

“Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul? For the Son of Man will come with his angels in the glory of his Father and will judge all people according to their deeds. And I tell you the truth, some standing here right now will not die before they see the Son of Man coming in his Kingdom.’” -- Matthew 16:24-28 (NLT)

Losing life, not saving it, is the pattern for followers of this Messiah, “The Christ is led as the lamb to the slaughter.” Know what cross you are taking up. Anyone can certainly take up the cross, just like anyone could take up the shield in The Falcon and The Winter Soldier. John Walker took up the shield. He unrightfully killed a person by taking justice and revenge in his own hands. In his conversations to bring peace of mind to himself, he also justified the wrongful death.

The cross has unfortunately been used to bring down others. Dr. Cone explains how acts of segregation, lynching, racial injustices, and brutality caused to the black community, was that white power did this to deny the people's humanity. Dr. Cone also discusses these new forms of controlling blacks, “was grounded in the religious belief that America is a white nation called by God to bear witness to the superiority of ‘white over black.’... Lynching was the white community's way of forcibly reminding blacks of their inferiority and powerlessness.”(2011:7) We see how the cross can harm with recent news that the Catholic Church has covered up the deaths of at least 4,100 First Nation Indigenous children who were forcibly sent to Residential Schools in Canada. This horrible finding has started the way for the investigation of Native American Boarding Schools that were run in the United States.

Because us Christ followers are called to take up our cross and follow Christ, it does not mean that this is used to justify suffering and ignore the struggles of the oppressed. Don't confuse expecting people to endure racism, oppression, and injustice as carrying their cross. All you have done is placed the weight of burdens and atrocities on them. Remember again, "symbols are nothing without the women and men that give them meaning." Christ has given the cross the meaning of hope. The cross of Christ crucified we carry should bring hope in a broken and fallen world.

It was heartbreaking to hear Isaiah Bradley explain in the show that no self respecting black man would want to be Captain America. You think about all the injustices, oppression, and denial of humanity, people of color endured. Is there any hope out of this darkness? I sometimes wonder why they, we, I would choose to pick up the cross. How did people of Israel find hope in the midst of Roman occupation, rule and oppression? I reflected back to stories people told me and stories I've read of oppression and how denial of their humanity looked like. Malcolm X made it clear that while people are hoping for a dream, there are people living a nightmare of racism. Dr. Cone talks about how people found hope through gathering in church because Christ inverted the meaning of the cross to become a symbol of hope and the divine power of God overcoming the power of sin and death. With that hope, the black community affirmed their humanity through music. Dr Cone brings forward Richard Wright's, *Twelve Million Voices*, "**On Sunday morning at church, black Christians spoke back in song, sermon, and prayer against the 'faceless, merciless, apocalyptic vengefulness of the massed white mob,' ... African Americans embraced the story of Jesus, the crucified Christ, whose death they claimed paradoxically gave them life, just as God resurrected him in the life of the earliest Christian community.**" (2011:18) When we carry this cross, are we willing to affirm people of color's humanity or will we turn our gaze away from the widely scattered acts of injustice that are present in the American landscape? Know what cross you are taking up.

What does the cross mean to you? Unfortunately, the church hasn't always been a place that offers hope in the midst of a broken and fallen world. Church, don't play the victim. Christ told his disciples and he tells his disciples today, the cross we take up may be a place where we may have to risk our own life. We easily quote Martin Luther King. King knew the way of the cross, he walked alongside the people who were oppressed, marginalized, the least of these, and he laid down his life because he reflected the love and hope of God. The cross we take up offers hope. It challenges us daily if we are willing to take up the cross and accept a marginalized brown Middle Eastern man as our Savior. It is one thing to practice our faith in a safe space. It is different to live out our faith beyond the walls built to separate.

It's a big deal that Steve Rogers passed the mantle of Captain America to Sam Wilson. Sam embodied being courageous, righteous, and hopeful, just like Steve. Sam questioned if he was the right man to take up the shield. He grew up in the south, he knows about the struggles and

hardship of the black community. He also sat down and listened to Isaiah Bradley's story. He hears of men being treated as experiments and evidence, their dignity taken away. The history of the shield is more complicated. This black man was willing to take up the mantle of Captain America. He's willing to stand up for the struggles his people endured, preserve their history, and keep fighting for the world and his people.

What does the cross mean to you? It's difficult to separate the culture of our people and our faith. God never tells us to homogenize people. What does it look like to take up the cross daily and live out your culture and your faith? If you are in a place where you have not experienced social and cultural injustices, are you willing to take up your cross and journey with the oppressed, marginalized, the least of these? If you have experienced social and cultural injustices, are you willing to take up your cross and stand up for the struggles of your people, preserve your history, and journey together with other people of color? Christians, God calls us to invert our understanding of the cross. May this cross no longer be an ornate symbol we wear. May we carry and bear the cross for peace, freedom, and love of those who have been exploited, oppressed, and marginalized. May it represent God's son, the crucified Jesus and the very good news of hope and love he brings.