



Saint John United Methodist Church
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Message for March 29, 2020
"Cross Bearing"
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: Luke 23:26-31

As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then

*"they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!"
and to the hills, "Cover us!"*

For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (Luke 23:26-31)

Lay Down Your Plans

If anything, the Covid-19 Pandemic has compelled us to adjust. These past couple of weeks we have had to do things differently. We have had to do life differently and, in some instances, we had to do it drastically.

If you are anything like me, you like everything all nice, neat, and planned out. Surprises aren't always easy. Adjustment takes a tremendous amount of energy. Having to shift gears can be pretty tough. Dropping back and punting isn't as easy as it sounds.

You and I are all about making plans and sticking to them and the last couple of weeks have taught us that those plans can change with the passing of each news cycle.

In fact, the enormity of change world-wide has produced a tremendous amount of anxiety, in part, because we don't know when this will end.

Let's hear from God's word. From James 4:13-15 we read, "*Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow, we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow.*

What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

Instead you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.'" (James 4:13-15)

In a word, we need to lay down our plans in deference to the God's will. It is okay to plan, we just need to make sure the Lord is included, and if the Lord is included, let's remain open to what he wants instead of what we want.

In a word, we would do well to lay down our plans.

Simon of Cyrene

Today we consider one who did just that.

One of my favorite characters in all of scripture is Simon of Cyrene.

Cyrene was a city in Northern Africa just west of Egypt. There were a number of converts to Judaism there and Simon was one of them.

Back in the day, it was the hope of every Jew at least once to celebrate Passover in the Holy City of Jerusalem. For Simon that time had come.

Simon had ventured a long way and upon arriving in Jerusalem found himself caught up in all that was going on. He had even come upon a rather gruesome parade that had Jesus carrying his cross to the place of his crucifixion.

The scene leading up to Christ's crucifixion was stark, to say the least. His trial was a mockery. The beating he sustained was excruciating. The jeers of the many who lined the streets on the way to his death were overwhelming. Not to anyone's surprise, Jesus was brought to the point of exhaustion.

The street that Jesus trod on the way to his crucifixion is called the Via Dolorosa. The Via Dolorosa is best translated, "*The Way of Sorrows.*"

Those who were crucified were forced to carry their cross through the streets as a reminder to those who gathered that this was the lot for those who broke the law.

Gathered there along the Via Dolorosa were not just those who were jeering Christ, but those who were genuinely grieved.

Our scripture for today from Luke 23 shares that there were a number a women who walked behind, weeping and wailing as he went along. As I said, it was a rather gruesome scene.

Enter then Simon of Cyrene.

He just happened upon what was going on. He took things in as more of a curious bystander than one who wanted to get involved.

As Christ passed, the Lord stumbled and couldn't get up. Exhaustion had taken its toll.

It was then that one of the Roman soldiers charged with keeping things going tapped Simon of the shoulder with his sword and compelled him to pick up where Christ had left off.

Simon was forced to carry the cross of Christ.

Simon really didn't have a choice. His plans were dashed. Upon carrying the cross, Simon would now be considered unclean and thereby unable to celebrate the Passover.

Simon had to lay aside all his plans. We can only begin to imagine his disappointment, but then again, maybe we can.

We have had to face our own share of disappointment the past few days. We are learning that disappointments are simply a part of life. How we deal with them makes all the difference in the world.

A Life Changed

We are left to wonder what Jesus and Simon might have talked about during their walk along the Via Dolorosa. Maybe they didn't talk at all. Maybe there were just a couple of glances exchanged.

As Jesus himself said, *"The eye is the window to the soul."*
We are left to consider how Simon's life might have been changed.

Often times when **our** plans change, God has a way of working **his** plans into the mix.

While we don't know for sure, in regard to Simon, we can certainly infer some things.

This account in the Gospel of Mark shares that Simon was *"the father of Alexander and Rufus."* (Mark 15:21) Mark would not have mentioned Alexander and Rufus if they weren't known by other Christians.

It's not a stretch to think that Simon of Cyrene's life was changed that day along the Via Dolorosa and, consequently, the life of his family.

More on Laying Our Plans Aside

Great things take place when our plans are laid aside and we find ourselves connecting with Jesus, even when things are full of grief and disappointment.

Simon very well may have thought, *"Boy, talk about being at the wrong place at the wrong time."*

Never in his wildest dreams could he have imagined that he would have been forced to carry the cross of Christ, yet in that it's not a stretch to consider that his life was dramatically changed.

In the moment, Simon very well may have thought about how unjustly he had been treated. In hindsight, he had to rejoice that he had connected with Jesus in the ways he did.

In the moment, all of us are wondering what a short sheet the Coronavirus represents. I pray though that there will be a day that we look back on things and will see that God was at work all along.

I have been saying since the very beginning, *"God is seeing us through."* I think that's significantly different than saying, *"God will see us through."*

"God is seeing us through" recognizes that God is actively at work right now.

Carrying the Cross

I like what Maxie Dunham has to say when it comes to the cross. It is apropos for Simon, it is apropos for you and me.

Maxie says, *"If you get too close to the cross, eventually you will end up carrying it."*

There is something about the cross that draws us closer to Christ and what he came to do.

It is there at the cross that we understand the deep love God has for each and every one of us and the power he offers to forgive.

If we ponder the cross long enough we will soon understand that there is nothing we can do to earn what's offered there. The cross is very much a matter of grace, amazing grace.

We do though look for ways to respond and soon understand that the only true response is to give our lives to Christ through faith.

Jesus says, *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."* (Luke 9:23)

We shouldn't take that lightly.

Years ago, Anton Lang was playing the part of Christ in the great play at Oberammergau in Germany. One night when the play was over an American businessman was given the privilege to visit backstage and meet some of the performers.

While backstage the businessman was immediately drawn to the cross that Lang carried. The man tried to lift it and found it to be quite heavy.

In addressing Lang the man asked, *"I don't understand it, why do you carry such a heavy cross?"*

"If I did not feel the weight of his cross," said Lang, *"I couldn't play the part."*

In taking up the cross of Christ that fateful day, Simon most certainly felt its weight and in feeling its weight denied himself and would thereafter follow the one who would soon be crucified on it.

Simon's sins were covered that day as were the sins of the entire world.

Simon gave up a lot, but in giving up he was able to gain so much more.

Is There Anyone for Calvary?

So it comes to you to consider your own response.

Here in the midst of this Lenten season you are challenged to consider your own discipleship and what it means to deny yourself, to take up your cross, and follow Jesus.

I understand that there was a time when the train from Evanston, Illinois to Chicago would to pass a cemetery called Calvary. Since people got off at that stop occasionally, the train only stopped when people signaled they wanted to get off.

That being the case, the conductor would call out as the train neared the cemetery, *"The next station is Calvary. Is there anyone for Calvary?"*

The train of our lives lets us off at all sorts of things—our work, the park, the beauty salon, the clothing store, the movie theatre, and even the NCAA Tournament. Oh yeah, I forgot the train doesn't stop at those things anymore, at least for a bit.

The train of our lives though does give us the opportunity to get off at Calvary.

And by getting off at Calvary and pondering what Christ has done there, we are given the opportunity to be forgiven, to place our trust in him and thereby finding ourselves ready to follow him all the more.

And so this Lent, the conductor is calling out, *"The next stop is Calvary. Is there anyone for Calvary?"*

How about you?