

During this season of Lent, Jennifer and I are preaching a sermon series entitled “Were You There?: Finding Ourselves at the Foot of the Cross.” Each week we focus on a different character who appears in the drama of Jesus’ final days before the crucifixion, and we ponder together the ways in which we might see ourselves in that character. Today’s sermon will look at the person named Simon of Cyrene. He is mentioned in all three synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but in each Gospel, he is mentioned in only one verse. He is a minor character who plays only a tiny part in the larger drama, but I think we will discover that we have a good bit in common with him.

Our text this morning comes from the Gospel of Mark. In the preceding verses, Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified. In the courtyard, the soldiers beat Jesus, and mock him as the King of the Jews: they put a purple cloak on him, because kings in those days wore purple, and they put a crown on his head, a crown of thorns. Hear now chapter 15, verses 20 and 21: *After mocking Jesus, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.*

Let’s imagine for a moment that this man Simon has returned to his hometown of Cyrene which was in northern Africa. Let’s imagine that he is sitting around the supper table with his wife and their 2 sons Alexander and Rufus, and he is telling them about his unusual experience in Jerusalem:

“You will never believe what a strange thing happened to me! After all these years of celebrating Passover here at home in Cyrene, and longing to celebrate it at least once in Jerusalem, I had high hopes indeed of what it would be like, but I never would’ve imagined this!

“There I was, walking along the road from the countryside into Jerusalem, when I saw a group of people coming toward me. There seemed to be some commotion, but I couldn’t quite figure it out. There were some Roman soldiers, and others seemed to be watching some kind of procession, and moving along with it. And then I saw what they were all looking at: 3 men, struggling to carry heavy beams... And then I knew: they were criminals, headed for crucifixion. Sure enough, I looked over at the hill in the distance, and I saw 3 vertical posts already set up, waiting for these men to bring their own cross-beam, to which they would be nailed and then hoisted onto the vertical post, for that terrible, excruciating death by crucifixion that the

Romans seem to take delight using, in order to reinforce their brute power over an occupied territory, to make an example out of wrong-doers.

“As the procession grew nearer, I noticed that one of the 3 men carrying those cross-beams looked more beaten up than the other two: he had bruises on his head and on his arms, and puncture marks on his forehead and around the crown of his head, bleeding, as if he’d had on some kind of headpiece of torture. Under the weight of that cross-beam, he seemed to be staggering more than the other two; he seemed drained of all energy, as if he’d been up all night.

“And then, just as the whole procession drew even closer to me, a couple of the soldiers stopped that one man, lifted his cross-beam off his shoulders, and ordered him to step aside, and in a split second, I knew what was going on: those soldiers were not feeling sorry for him, this was no act of kindness or compassion. It was actually quite the opposite! It was pure cruelty, and vindictiveness and spite: they were afraid that he might die before he was ever hoisted into position for crucifixion, and they wanted to prolong his life, in order to prolong his misery! They wanted to keep him alive, so that he would have to endure the agony of the slow asphyxiation of crucifixion.

“And in the next split second, one of the soldiers was pointing to ME, ordering me to carry that cross-beam for him! I couldn’t move; I felt like I was frozen, rooted to the spot. How did I attract the attention of that brutal Roman soldier? Then a different soldier grabbed me and shoved me toward that cross-beam, and laid it on my shoulder, and oh, it was so much heavier than I had even imagined. As I began dragging it along the road, the rough wood splintered off into my hands, and shoulders, and my back and legs began to ache. The crowd looked at me, and I couldn’t tell what they were thinking: did they feel pity for me? Did they feel relief that I had been chosen, and not them? Did they think that somehow I deserved this, that I must’ve done or said something to bring this on myself?

“After what seemed like a long time, we finally arrived at the appointed spot, and I handed over the beam. I scurried back into the crowd, trying to hide, to get out of sight of the soldiers... but they weren’t interested in me any more. All eyes were fixed on these three criminals, as the soldiers man-handled them with such contempt and violence, and nailed them to those cross-beams, and then hoisted them up onto the vertical posts. I didn’t know any of these people, and yet I found myself smack in the middle of all that intensity and suffering and cruelty... I don’t really know what to make of it all.”

That night at supper so long ago, I wonder how Simon ended his story.

Did he tell his family how he resented this rude interruption of his plans and his hopes for a wonderful Passover celebration in the Holy City? Or might he have told of his surly obedience to the soldiers demands? Did he flee the scene as soon as he was relieved of the burden of carrying that cross-beam? Or might he have stayed to witness the crucifixion? Might he have talked to people in the crowd, and heard stories about Jesus' life and ministry, his teachings, and healings, and the amazing quality of love that drew people toward him? Could it be that Simon even sought out the disciples and stayed in Jerusalem long enough to hear news of the resurrection?

We don't know the answers to any of these questions, but one intriguing suggestion of the text in Mark is that people in the early church knew Simon's sons Rufus and Alexander. Verse 21 says, "they compelled a passer-by who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus." So, I wonder if Simon's experience of being compelled to carry the cross might have anything to do with Rufus and Alexander's connection to the early church?

Simon of Cyrene was no hero. He was forced to carry that cross. But I'd like to think that this experience profoundly changed his life. I'd like to think that this taste of suffering and death gave him a heightened appreciation for life. I'd like to think that the weight of the cross gave him a deep sense of compassion for the One who would be nailed to it. I'd like to think that he came to understand this as the deepest honor of his life: to participate with Christ in his suffering on behalf of the world. I'd like to think that at some point, Simon appreciated this experience of carrying Jesus' cross, not as a meaningless burden, but as a gift – a gift that brought a deep sense of connection to Jesus, the Savior of the world, and a deep sense of connection to all others who suffer.

It seems to me that we all have a good bit in common with Simon of Cyrene, because burdens will come our way that we did not choose and that we do not deserve; these are heavy burdens, burdens of sorrow or great suffering or injustice. There is no satisfactory answer to the question of "Why?"; why was Simon chosen instead of someone else? So, the question then becomes, "What do I do with this cross in my life? How do I understand this suffering? Will I allow this heavy cross to make me bitter and resentful, or can I allow this cross, this undeserved affliction, to draw me closer to Jesus, to experience a deep connection with him in his suffering? Can I allow this heavy cross to give me a deepened sense of connection to others who suffer? Can I allow this cross to give me a heightened appreciation for life? Can this suffering, which seems so pointless and empty and such a dead end, somehow lead to new life?"

A psychotherapist tells the story of a patient of his named Stephen, a perceptive and successful businessman happily married and with a young son. Stephen was experiencing bouts of depression, and at some point the conversation turned to his relationship with his parents and the kind of upbringing he had had. Stephen's parents were materially generous but emotionally stingy people; they gave him, in his words, "everything I could possibly want – except, of course, time and affection." "I can't change the way I was raised," he said, "but what I can do is take a good hard look at it and make sure that I don't make those same mistakes with *my* son." And then, after a brief, reflective pause, he added, "I honestly don't know that I would be so aware of the need to show my boy how much I love him – to really *show* it, not just expect him to assume it – if it hadn't been absent in my own childhood."

What Stephen was talking about was bearing the cross of an unhappy experience, but then using it, perhaps the way Simon did, to see a reality he might otherwise have missed. Just as Simon could gain some small glimpse of the agony of another man, Stephen could gain a sense of what it would mean for his son to go through his childhood unsure of his parents' love for him. Stephen took something painful from his past and gave it new life to the end that it might bear fruit for someone else, his son. 1

In Jerusalem today, you can walk along the road that Jesus and Simon walked with the cross. Many visitors to the Holy Land walk this road as a spiritual activity, a way of connecting with Jesus. And even if, after all these centuries, the location is not exactly the same as it was then, the spiritual value of walking and remembering is profound.

This road has been known through the centuries as the Via Dolorosa, a Latin name that means "the way of sorrow" or the "road of suffering." It seems to me that the world is filled with many Via Dolorosas, crowded with millions of people who are compelled to carry heavy burdens of sorrow or suffering: those who bury a child, those who suffer mental illness, those who can't make ends meet even with a full-time job, those who have painful memories of abuse or other trauma in their childhood, those around the world who flee their homes and villages due to violence or drought or flooding or wildfires, and the list could go on and on. The world is filled with Via Dolorosas.

And so, as we walk the Via Dolorosa, carrying our own heavy load, and possibly even helping someone else carry theirs as well, we see, if we have eyes to see, that Christ is in our midst, suffering alongside us, bearing with the world the heavy weight of grief and anguish.

And maybe, just maybe, our own taste of suffering along the way can give us a heightened appreciation for life – that terrible, hopeful, messy, dreadful, glorious experience that is life. Maybe, just maybe, our journey down the Via Dolorosa gives us a deepened compassion for others we encounter along this road. Maybe, just maybe, we can come to understand this experience of the Via Dolorosa not as a meaningless, pointless burden, but as a gift – a gift that connects us deeply to all others who suffer, a gift that connects us deeply to Jesus, the Redeemer of the world. Amen.

Now Morgan Riley will sing a song entitled “Via Dolorosa.”

1 Erik Kolbell, Were You There?: Finding Ourselves at the Foot of the Cross, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p. 84.