

Via Dolorosa

The title I've given today's sermon is *Via Dolorosa*, which may not be a familiar term to all of you. It's Latin for "The Way of Sorrows" and it refers to a path between the existing remnants of the Fortress Antonia, where it is believed that Jesus had his trial before Pilate, and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which was erected at the traditional location of the Empty Tomb in A.D. 335. For centuries, Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem have walked this path, seeking to literally follow in the footsteps of Jesus as he staggered through the last few meters of his earthly life.

Of course, with the advent of Islam, the bloodiness of the Crusades, and the seemingly endless warfare in the Holy Land, the *Via Dolorosa* has not always been or seemed safe for pilgrims. Over time, European pilgrims especially began to look for symbolic ways to follow the "Sorrowful Way." A tradition began to build of a pathway around the interior or exterior of churches, where Christians would stop at a set number of points to remember the various Scriptural and legendary events which were the "milestones" of that last sad walk. These points became known as "The Stations of the Cross," with some sort of graphic display – a painting or sculpture or tapestry – marking each station. In 1686, Pope Innocent XI gave permission to the Franciscan order to have such displays in their churches, in compensation for the fact that, although they were official guardians of the real sites in Jerusalem, pilgrims weren't going and filling the coffers there. The Franciscans lost their monopoly in 1731, when Pope Clement XII extended the franchise to all Catholic churches and set the number of stations at 14.

Those of you who grew up Catholic or in some other liturgical traditions will, of course know the names and order of the stations but for those like myself who were deprived of this honorable tradition, here is the list: Jesus is condemned to death; Jesus takes up his cross; Jesus falls the first time; Jesus meets his mother; Simon of Cyrene carries the cross; Veronica wipes the face of Jesus; Jesus falls the second time; Jesus meets the daughters of Jerusalem; Jesus falls the third time; Jesus is stripped of his garments; Jesus is nailed to the cross; Jesus is crucified; Jesus is taken down from the cross; Jesus' body is laid in the tomb.

Those of you who are listening carefully will have noticed that some of these are neither in the passage I read a moment ago nor among the stories you may be familiar with in the passion. In fact, the following are not in the Scriptures: Jesus falls the first time; Jesus meets his mother; Veronica wipes the face of Jesus; Jesus falls the second time; and, Jesus falls the third time. These are all from various legendary sources that built up over time and which also added such details to popular retellings of the Passion as the idea that Jesus' body was laid in the lap of his mother, a scene popular in devotional art and rendered most famously by Michelangelo in *La Pieta*. In recent years, even the Church of Rome has moved away from these legends. On Good Friday, 1991, Pope John Paul II introduced a new "Scriptural Way of the Cross" and in 2007, Pope Benedict XVI approved it for meditation and public celebration. I guess they saw some merit in that whole *Sola Scriptura* thing after all.

But much as I love to tease my wife about the oddities of Roman Catholic practice, I'm really only giving some context for my focus this morning – the two events along the *Via Dolorosa* that have their precedent in our reading this morning. Unless you grew up with the Stations of the Cross, you may not have paid much attention to these two little moments in the Gospel. According to Luke and I think they both have something to recommend them. So we'll take a few moments this morning to consider the stories of Simon of Cyrene and the Daughters of

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Jerusalem and what possible implications they might have for us here in the Pacific Northwest of the 21st century.

Let's begin with Simon of Κυρήνη, which is how his city's name would have been pronounced in Greek and then in Latin. If you don't mind, I'll use that pronunciation because to many people from my part of the country, sy-rene means the noisemakers used by emergency vehicles; as in, "listen at them sy-renes, Tommy Jo – the Law must be after us!" But I digress. Simon's hometown was located in the northeast of what is now Libya and had featured a large Jewish community since the time of Alexander the Great or before. Simon would likely have been a member of that community, in Jerusalem for Passover. His family may have been Judean immigrants to Cyrene, Cyrenean converts, which means they would have been from the Berber natives of North Africa, or a mixed family. If Simon was a Berber, he would have been related to the neighbors that toddler Jesus had in Egypt and, as far as we can tell, is the first African to enter the story of the grown Messiah. I'll come back to that idea in a moment.

We should note that Simon did not step forward voluntarily to relieve Jesus' burden. The NRSV reads, "(the soldiers) seized a man..." Luke's Greek is "angareuo," which is a technical term. If you've read novels about the English Navy of the 18th and 19th centuries, you'll know they used a compulsory recruiting tool called "impressment," which means they sent a gang of officers & sailors around to scoop up any able bodied looking men in a port town and forcefully enlisted them. In this scenario, it's also related to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: "if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile." The Roman soldiers escorting Jesus to his execution, no doubt seeing they had beaten him to the point he could not carry his cross the whole way to Golgotha, simply seized Simon as an able bodied bystander and told him to do it. The legends of the Stations of the Cross notwithstanding, Simon probably carried it the whole rest of the way.

There are some intriguing hints as to what may have happened to Simon after that fateful day. In The Gospel According to Mark, the author calls Simon "the father of Alexander and Rufus," as if his audience would know the younger men. An early commentator on Mark, Papias, who died around A.D. 130, says that Mark wrote his version of the gospel for the Christian community in Rome, which suggests that Alexander and Rufus were known in that city. Tradition tells us that the brothers were Christian missionaries. Some have also wondered whether this is the same Rufus mentioned by Paul in the last chapter of Romans: "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also." At any rate, the Acts of the Apostles mentions some Cyreneans. Cyreneans are among those in Jerusalem for Pentecost who hear the Good News in their own language. Later in that book, we read of Jewish Christians originally from Cyrene who first preached the Gospel to non-Jews. Luke also names Lucius of Cyrene as one of several to whom the Holy Spirit spoke, instructing them to appoint Barnabas and Saul as missionaries. Is it possible that these other Cyreneans were brought into the fold by Simon? It's only speculation but it certainly seems possible.

Relieved of the burden of the cross, Jesus has the energy for one more bit of teaching on his way to Calvary. He addresses a group of women who are performing the rites of mourning for him prior to his execution. As he refers to them as "Daughters of Jerusalem," it is unlikely that these are among his long-time followers. More likely that they are residents of the city who have been

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following him since the triumphal entry the previous Sunday. They may have been among those who'd shouted "Let him be crucified" just hours before and now regret their words or they may have heard the dreadful news and rushed to console the young prophet or merely to see what would happen next. Jesus has no words of consolation for them but rather a warning:

"Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

Jesus was right. Evil days did come on Jerusalem, possibly within the lifetimes of some of those wailing women. Judaea continued to seethe under Roman control and a series of incidents in A.D. 66 instigated full scale war not only between Jews and Romans but also between factions of the Jews. It's unlikely that Judaea would have gained independence from Rome at any rate but after the revolutionaries drove out both the Jerusalem garrison and their relief from Syria, they turned on each other in a quest for control. Ultimately three legions under the command of the soon-to-be Emperor Vespasian besieged the previously successful revolutionaries in Jerusalem. The siege lasted a brutal seven months in A.D. 70 before the final walls were breached and the city put to the torch. Not only were the city and the Temple destroyed but estimates of deaths within Jerusalem are as high as 1.1 million with many from starvation and disease. Survivors were either led off as slaves or crucified by the hundreds. The three crucified on Good Friday were just the sputterings of the fire in green wood. The dry wood of A.D. 70 produced an inferno. When revolts continued to pop up in the Judean and Galilean countryside, the Romans finally responded with a campaign in A.D. 132 that resulted in an almost complete Jewish genocide, a ban on Jewish practice in Judaea and a renaming of the province to Syria Palestina. An estimated several thousand Jews remained in Galilee. The rest were scattered to the winds.

The Daughters of Jerusalem may have wept for Jesus but they don't seem to have listened to him or, if they did listen, they were ineffective in passing on his warning. Jesus' countrymen didn't see how their repeated choices of violence against the Romans and against each other could only result in their destruction. It seems to me that in today's Church we still have a lot of people who make a lot of noise about how much they love Jesus but who make little if any effort to actually follow him. Like the families of those Daughters of Jerusalem, these "Christians" still choose violence in speech and action when it comes to dealing with foreigners or with those of their own people with whom they disagree over trivial matters. The current spiritual heirs of the Daughters of Jerusalem give lip service to the ideals which Jesus taught, ideals which were already present in the Law and the Prophets and which we can still find in the world's religions. But, as I preached at some length last week, humankind has a propensity to violence and until we truly learn to love our neighbors, we live in the shadow of destruction. It is not enough to give vent to sentimental outpourings of affection for Jesus or to give surface homage to any spiritual path. We are called to show true love in action, in deeds and not just in words.

The lesson for us from the story of Simon of Cyrene is quite different. Remember, he may have simply been a passer-by drafted by the soldiers to help Jesus. He may have never seen or even heard of the man until that day. In a similar way, some who are here this morning may feel a bit shanghai-ed. It might be that some of our young people are wondering why mom and dad make

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them come to church. It might be that there is a spouse or two here who'd rather be at home watching TV or working in the garden. If we're honest about it, we sometimes come kicking and screaming to worship or, indeed, to faith, even pastors.

But something happened that day that made Simon take notice of the man whom he'd been forced to help. Clearly, his sons were known by the Christian community in Rome, likely as fellow Christians. It is nearly impossible to think that they did not learn that faith from their father, who'd been on the scene. Simon's unwilling association with Jesus turned into the faith of his family and of many of his countrymen. I outlined the number of Cyreneans mentioned among the faithful in Acts but it's also true that some of the giants of the Early Church were Berbers, North Africans like Simon and the Cyreneans. Western Christianity would not exist in the form we have it today were it not for Church Fathers like Tertullian, Cyprian, and, most famously, Augustine of Hippo. Simon was forced to literally take up the cross and follow Christ but the real faith that he must have found as a result seems to have had an outsized effect on Christianity.

So, for those of you who may be wishing you were somewhere else right now, beware! The message of God's love for us and the call for us to love others can be insidious. God may be laying claim to you right now, even as you squirm and look for escape! I'm being a little silly about this, of course, but it's remarkable how the Spirit can move us to places we never expected to be. Another part of the spiritual heritage of Simon of Cyrene may sound familiar to members of Good Shepherd Baptist Church. In England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, there is a movement variously called "The Simon Community" or "The Cyreneans." These are folk who've dedicated themselves to, as Simon did, relieving the burdens of those who struggle. Specifically, they minister to those who are experiencing homelessness or, as they say in the U.K., "sleeping rough." They run shelters and transitional housing and have programs to feed people living on the streets. We have some things in common.

Even at the end of Jesus' earthly life, he was demonstrating the love he'd learned from the Father. We've heard how he reached out to Peter and to Judas, warning them of the consequences of their paths, urging them to make different choices. He warned and urged the Daughters of Jerusalem, too. They did not heed him but Simon must have noticed. Judging from the slender Biblical witness, he, too, entered into the life of love and the effects continue to ripple today. As we celebrate our love feast, our Lord's Supper, let us think of Simon and how that one simple moment changed his life and so many others and let us consider how Jesus' love has changed our life. How can we live out that love in order to make a difference for others? For with the love of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the companionship of the Holy Spirit, we can, in our own small ways, begin to make the change in the world that the world so desperately needs. Thanks be to God! Amen.