

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, March 4, 2018
3rd Sunday of Lent/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year B

Primary Text: Mark 15:16-20

John 19:16

Mark 15:21

Luke 23:27-31

Sermon Title: “Crown, Cross, and Conversation”

Theme

Text

Jesus is scourged and crowned with thorns (Mark 15:16-20)

¹⁶Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. ¹⁷And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. ¹⁸And they began saluting him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" ¹⁹They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. ²⁰After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

Jesus takes up his cross (John 19:16)

¹⁶Then he handed him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus; ¹⁷and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha.

Jesus is helped by Simon of Cyrene to carry his cross (Mark 15:21)

²¹They 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.

Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem (Luke 23:27-31)

²⁷A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. ²⁸But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹For 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.' ³⁰Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' ³¹For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

Sermon

This Lent we are journeying with Jesus along the Scriptural Stations of the Cross that begin in the Garden of Gethsemane on the infamous night of his betrayal, and it will end on Good Friday when his broken and lifeless body is hastily laid to rest in a borrowed tomb.

Traditionally, the Stations of the Cross in its several forms, are supposed to be a meditative spiritual exercise, so if you would like to and it would be helpful to you, I invite you to relax and close your eyes and allow the narrative and my commentary to play out in the theater of your mind. However, if you are one of those people who close your eyes and then fall asleep, you might want to focus your attention on the picture on the screen.

Jesus is scourged and crowned with thorns (Mark 15:16-20)

¹⁶Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. ¹⁷And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. ¹⁸And they began saluting him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" ¹⁹They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. ²⁰After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

Last weekend we concluded with Pilate washing his hands of the Jesus problem. Though he, Pilate, found no guilt in him, there was no satisfying the bloodthirst of the crowd and so “to satisfy the crowd” Mark wrote, he released Barabbas, had Jesus flogged, and then handed him over to be crucified.

As you heard in the gospel readings for today, having been given judgement, Jesus was handed over to Roman soldiers. His fate was sealed, he was a “dead man walking” to borrow a term from our modern penal system. The soldiers knew it and they also knew that their treatment of the prisoner was part of the sentence. And since this Jesus problem seemed to be popular amusement of Jewish leadership, why not perform for them. That is the “cohort” that was referred to.

If you have seen Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ” then I think you have a pretty good idea of the festivities that followed.

They mocked Jesus as the King of the Jews by giving him a purple cloak, purple being the color of royalty. This is the reason that purple is the liturgical color for the season of Lent. The soldiers thought it was funny.

They thought it was equally funny to give him a royal crown – all kings wear crowns, even our children know this. I don't believe we have a crown of thorns here at Zion. I've had one in my possession in the past, they are nasty business to keep around. I mean, what does one do with a crown of thorns? It is a difficult piece to store and handle without getting stabbed by the two-inch long sharp barbs. Don't focus on my inconvenience though.

Rather, imagine one on your head. And not gently placed there. On the contrary, rudely smashed onto Jesus head and then wobbled left and right so that it literally punctured and torn into the flesh of his head.

Are you getting uncomfortable with my description yet? I am just beginning.

Blood began to flow freely down his face and into his eyes from the myriad puncture wounds.

They continued to humiliate him by bowing down to him and saluting him and shouting, "Hail King of the Jews." They spat on him, they spat in his face, much to the amusement of the crowd of rabble – this is what they wanted after all.

And then Mark added, they struck his head with a reed. Remember he is wearing a crown of thorns? Each blow drove the thorns deeper into his flesh, opening his many wounds a little more.

Though it is not mentioned specifically, it is probable that the flogging continued as well. Flogging was a heinous punishment. The Romans used a flog that had pieces of metal attached to the end of leather straps. It was designed for maximum damage, tearing into and ripping the skin and muscle tissue. Sound harsh? The victim was going to die anyway.

Again, if you have seen Mel Gibson's, "The Passion of the Christ" this scene is particularly difficult to watch. Personally, I think it is likely a true depiction of what Jesus went through.

The torture and beating that Jesus endured would have probably killed him in time had he not been crucified. But the torture and humiliation was just beginning. Satisfied that they had done their worst, the Roman soldiers put his cross on his shoulders and led him to Golgotha.

Jesus takes up his cross (John 19:16-17)

¹⁶Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

So they took Jesus; ¹⁷and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha.

You may find this difficult to believe, but you check it out yourself, this passage from John is the only reference in scripture that refers to Jesus actually carrying his cross.

Think of all the passages where Jesus mentioned the cross, or being lifted up - a reference to his crucifixion, or when he mentioned that his followers need to pick up our crosses and follow him. The fact is, the only reference to him actually picking up his cross and making his way to Golgotha is in John 19:17. Every movie that has been made about the passion includes the struggle Jesus had in carrying his own cross to Golgotha.

Personally, I've never been to the Holy Lands, maybe some of you have. If I could plan one exotic vacation it would be to the Holy Lands so that I could walk the same dusty paths that Jesus walked, sail on the same water that Jesus walked on, and yes, see all the gaudy shrines that mark the traditional historic places of Jesus life.

Did you know whether or not the Via Delarosa is the authentic path Jesus walked is in question? It's really difficult to say because scholars suggest that when the Via Delarosa was established in the 14th century the route "conveniently" went through the market place – the thinking being that pilgrims would generate business. That may be true, I don't know.

For me personally, it doesn't matter. I think the Via Delarosa is probably the authentic one, but for another reason – for maximum impact. His enemies, whether they be Pilate and the Roman occupational force, or the rabble made up of the spiritual and religious leaders of his people who rallied the rest of the Jewish

population against him, they made Jesus, bloody and beaten down, carry his own cross through the busiest part of Jerusalem for maximum impact. From Jesus' adversaries and enemies hear this unspoken warning, "Mess with our system and this could happen to you!"

The Via Dolorosa is only about a half mile long. What's the big deal, you might be thinking. Let me remind you:

- He was kept up all night, praying to his Heavenly Father first; then being interrogated by the Sanhedrin; then walked to the Pilate's palace for trial. After the trial he was beaten half to death. So this is the person of Jesus who was then given his cross to carry.
- Now there are two schools of thought on Jesus' carrying of his cross. Some say he carried the whole thing, the vertical beam and the crossbeam. If that is the case it would have weighed approximately 300 pounds.
- And others say he only carried the cross beam. If that is the case it would have approximately weighed a mere 100 pounds.
- Allow me to ask: Can you lift 100 pounds? Then carry it a half mile? On no sleep? After a beating?

According to the traditional Stations of the Cross Jesus fell three times, at station three, seven, and nine. None of these falls are recorded in scripture, but there is no doubt in my mind that he stumbled and fell along the way.

It wasn't the weight of the cross alone that he carried, that caused him to stumble and fall, and get back up and go on the whole distance. He also carried the weight of the world's sin, including yours and mine.

Jesus is helped by Simon of Cyrene to carry his cross (Mark 15:21)

²¹*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.*

Somewhere along the way, Jesus' badly beaten and broken body gave way. This should not surprise us. In the church we speak of the two natures of Christ, and by that we mean he was both at the same time truly divine and truly human. It was his truly human body that gave out and it was apparent to his Roman detail that he was

not going to make it carrying the cross. According to historians, when the soldiers took the punishment a little too far and their prisoner wasn't able to carry his own cross another condemned prisoner was given the task. But Jesus had enough strength to get far enough way that that was no longer an option. No worries, according to Luke, "a great number of people followed him" and so they just conscripted one. It happened to be Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. All three of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) record the story of Simon of Cyrene being recruited to help Jesus carry his cross.

Now Bible scholars point to this particular detail as proof that the story must be true. Their thinking is, if someone were to make up something they likely would not go to the extreme of getting the details so precise. And how is it that Mark and the other synoptic gospel writers got this detail right? Again, Bible scholars believe that after the resurrection and Pentecost, when the apostolic period began and the gospel began to be told and retold, the identity of the man who was Jesus' helper was revealed and they recorded it, because then Simon became yet another named witness.

I've often wondered if he wasn't somehow changed by the experience of seeing Jesus' bloody face, and looking into his loving eyes. And then when he heard the story of his resurrection, identified himself! "That was me! I was the one who had the honor of helping my Lord Jesus!" An honor that only became an honor after the resurrection.

Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem (Luke 23:27-31)

²⁷A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. ²⁸But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹For 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.' ³⁰Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' ³¹For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

This station of the Scriptural Stations of the Cross confuses me; maybe it does you too. "The people" referred to by Luke were the same ones who had just hours before, called for his crucifixion. Then, having gotten what they wanted, some of the women at least were lamenting getting what they asked for? With wailing and beating of their breasts?

To those women he said, “Do not weep for me. Weep for yourselves, for the coming judgement for your role in this will be so terrible that childless women will be considered the fortunate ones because they will not have to see their children face judgement.” After all, he knew, Jerusalem is the city that kills its prophets.

Jesus’ presence among them the last three years or so was the green wood he referred to.

They will no longer have him to preach and teach and perform signs and miracles for them. That is what he was referring to as the dry wood.

The retelling of this story is painful for us. “We were not there,” we try to tell ourselves; “We did not cry out for his crucifixion,” we try to convince ourselves. And while that is historically true, every time we sin, we become members of that crowd.

God did not spare his Son the cross for just them. Jesus did not say, “Father, forgive them” just about the ones implicated in the story.

Jesus himself said well before his Passion, “¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Let’s parse that out, and you help me fill in the blank.

¹⁶For God so loved the world
that he gave his only Son, so that everyone
who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

So who is left out of God’s plan? No one.

The Apostle Paul wrote in our First Reading, ¹ Corinthians 1:18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

And for those who come to him in faith confessing their sinfulness and need of a redeemer he offers eternal life. Aren’t you glad the story doesn’t end here?