

Who? Me?

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Luke 23:1-49

[1] Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate.

[2] They began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king."

[3] Then Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He answered, "You say so."

[4] Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no basis for an accusation against this man."

[5] But they were insistent and said, "He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place."

[6] When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean.

[7] And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time.

[8] When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign.

[9] He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer.

[10] The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him.

[11] Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate.

[12] That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

[13] Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people,

[14] and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him.

[15] Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death.

[16] I will therefore have him flogged and release him."

[18] Then they all shouted out together, "Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!"

[19] (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.)

[20] Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again;

[21] but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!"

Interim Pastor Tom Ford



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church



[22] A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him."

[23] But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed.

[24] So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted.

[25] He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

[26] As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus.

[27] A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him.

[28] But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.

[29] 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.'

[30] Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.'

[31] For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

[32] Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.

[33] When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

[34] Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing.

[35] And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"

[36] The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine,

[37] and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"

[38] There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

[39] One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

[40] But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"

[41] And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."

[42] Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

[43] He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

[44] It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon,

[45] while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.

[46] Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last.

[47] When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was

Interim Pastor Tom Ford



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innocent.”

[48] And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts.

[49] But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Grace be unto you, and peace, from God Our Father and Our Lord and Savior Jesus The Christ!

[26] As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus.

In September of 1979 Pope John Paul II came to Chicago. I was there in graduate school at the time and, like everyone else, I wanted to see the Pope. So, early on the morning before he was to appear in Grant Park I set out on a 7 mile run to Grant Park. It did not matter that I would be 3 hours early. I knew over a million people were expected. I wanted a good place to stand to see things.

Gradually people started arriving. More people in one place than I'd seen then or since. Up in trees. On top of buildings. Soon it became so crowded that you could move only with great difficulty. I was glad to be on the curb. Then, she spoke.

A little woman next to me. As we stood there facing the street he would soon come down. “Excuse, me, sir. Would you mind taking his picture for me? I'm so nervous my hand is shaking. I'd like a good picture of the Holy Father to take back to show my children and grandchildren.”

I didn't tell her I was a Lutheran Pastor. She told me she was a devout Catholic from Des Moines, Iowa and a school teacher. Her hand was just too shaky to take a good picture. So I said, “I'm glad to help you.” Then, in just a short time, he came. He was standing in the back of an open white limousine waving to the crowds. I had to pan the movement and click the shutter just before he passed me. Then I handed the camera back to the woman, who was tickled pink. We never exchanged names or addresses. I never knew if the picture turned out well. I only remember her smile. And exchanging a hug at the passing of the peace.

At each moment of our lives, wherever we find ourselves, God has something in store for us. Sometimes it's pleasant. Sometimes it's not pleasant. Sometimes it's terrible.

For Simon of Cyrene, it was at first terrible. He had come to Jerusalem from his native city on the northeast shore of modern day Lybia He had come, most likely with his family, to celebrate Passover. He was most likely an African Jew. Making him black. The Bible tells us his children were Rufus and

Interim Pastor Tom Ford



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church



Alexander. Rufus is a Roman name. Alexander is a Greek name. The name Simon could be either Jewish or Greek. Lybia then had Jews, Romans and Greeks. Cyrene, you may recall from your Bible studies, had people present on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem.

On this day, however, a Friday in April of 27 A.D. the only person we hear about from Cyrene is Simon. He too is near the curb. Trying, most likely, to get a view of the spectacle everyone else is trying to see.

Then a Roman soldier's voice comes to Simon as a shocking blast, "Hey you! Come here!"

"Who? Me?"

"Yeah, you black Jew. Get over here and pick up this cross bar and carry it!"

Listen to what Presbyterian Pastor John Rogers says: "There is something heroic about the crosses we choose to bear: The man who foregoes big profits and invests himself in the economic development of a third world nation far away ... the woman who resigns her lucrative job with the company that continues to cast women in demeaning social roles in its corporate advertising. There is a certain heroism in the cross we choose. Simon of Cyrene, however, is a symbol of the great company of women and men in every age who are forced to bear a cross they did not choose. Where, if anywhere, is there any meaning to be found for the cross not chosen?"

"Every detail of that day in Simon's life could find its parallel in the lives of many others who, along some unexpected *via dolorosa* have been thrust under the weight of a cross not chosen. Here are a mother and father who are doing pretty well.... when all of a sudden their child is stricken by disease and dies. Now these two must bear the cross of that pain until the day they die. Here is a man or woman with a chemical imbalance that plays havoc with emotions and moods, with mental and motor functions, even with personal and sexual feelings. Or here is another born, according to the attitudes of society, with the wrong color of skin. Here is a child whose life has been indelibly marked by the abuses of a parent, whose own emotional gyroscope was set in the early years by someone who was cruel and abusive and violent ... "the sins of the father visited upon the children."

"The point is that all of us, and each one of us, has his or her own cross – a cross not chosen – to bear. Our lives are so interwoven and interdependent that there is no living alone. We are personally affected by the decisions and actions of others, by the policies and practices of social groups and governments, and even by the routine movements of nature. A simple snowstorm can on occasion cause a fatal accident that constructs the cross not chosen for the loved one left behind. What is the message spoken to us in this man, Simon of Cyrene, him whom they compelled to bear the cross of Jesus?"¹

¹ **The Crosses We Do Not Choose** – A Sermon Preached by John B. Rogers, Jr.
Covenant Presbyterian Church; Charlotte, North Carolina March 21, 2004

Interim Pastor Tom Ford



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We do not know with what attitude Simon carried Our Lord's cross. We only know he did not volunteer. We would like to believe that it was a transforming experience for him.

Regardless of the attitude Simon had as he carried Our Lord's cross, Simon raises for you and me the extremely important question for our Christian faith, with what attitude, with what faith do we carry the crosses we do not volunteer to carry, but must carry?

What happens after, "Who? Me?"?

The first thing that has to happen is that we have to deal with our negative feelings. The cross we have to carry that we did not choose has to become the cross we choose to carry.

Again, Pastor Rogers: "Simon may have been compelled to carry that cross, but Simon himself had to decide how it would be carried. In order to do that, I imagine, he first had to come to grips with himself. Many people want to blame life – God, fate, genes, parents, teachers, friends – for the cross not chosen, when the real trouble is with the self. Simon made the cross not chosen his own, accepted it as his vocation, and carried it to the top of the hill."²

This means Simon most likely came to see at some point that the cross he was forced to carry had a positive effect on his life and the lives of others, not a negative one.

A couple thought they knew what love was all about. Then a child is born with Down syndrome or Spinal Bifida. And they discover what love is all about. Or a wife contracts Alzheimer's and the husband goes to see her every day for years and discovers a far greater love than he has ever known.

How did Cowper put it?

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.
(William Cowper, "God Moves In A Mysterious Way")

Now, I know not everyone reacts to the cross not chosen this way. Some people simply can't take it and become bitter and curse God and dive to the bottom of a Seagram 7 bottle.

What accounts for the difference?

² Ibid.

Interim Pastor Tom Ford



Hill Ave Grace
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In a word: the Christian faith.

“I know in whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.”³

Our Christian faith tells us that God’s got the whole world in His Hands. God is working for good in ways we cannot now begin to comprehend. Our personal involuntary cross bearing circumstances are a part of God’s Divine beneficent work. Our Christian faith nurtures in us “... resources of interior strength that enable us to bear the cross not chosen, without being crushed to death, even when we do not understand why we must [bear it].”⁴

Finally, Simon of Cyrene’s involuntary cross bearing gives us the example to crawl under the crosses of those in our world who are asked to bear them, but who cannot. We work for a world that no longer crucifies people with hunger, poverty, abuse, slavery, and degradation. We see the exhausted Christ in the least of the brothers and sisters in our present world and reach out to help carry their crosses.

You see, after a while, we no longer retort, “Who? Me?” Our attitude becomes, “Me? Why not me?”

Martin Niemöller was a Lutheran pastor in Germany in the days of the Third Reich who was imprisoned for his resistance to Hitler. He wrote a letter to his parish in Berlin from that Nazi prison, which confesses our Christian faith concerning the cross not chosen:

Let us thank God that he upholds me as he does and allows no spirit of despair to enter into cell 448. Let the parish office know that in our ignorance of what is coming I am confident, and that I hope to be ready when I am led along paths which I never would have sought for myself.

Please pray now with me:

³ 2 Timothy 1:12

⁴ Rogers, Op. Cit.

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Heavenly Father, whose most dear Son, as He walked the way of the Cross, accepted the service of Simon of Cyrene to carry his physical burden for him: grant us each the grace gladly to bear one another's burdens, for the love of him who said, "As you did it to the least of these my brothers [and sisters], you did it to me," your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.⁵

AMEN

⁵ <http://elvis.rowan.edu/~kilroy/JEK/05/12.html>

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