Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Characters on the Road to the Cross, Part 1
Scripture: Luke 23:26-33
Code: 42-283

Just a little bit overwhelming this morning to worship the Lord with you all. I attended a lot of different churches while I was gone and was very often disappointed in the lack of expressions of worship in the cross-centered, Christ-centered ways and so refreshing this morning.

Well, when John Calvin was exiled from Geneva for three years and had to leave. Came back three years later, his first Sunday back after three years, he picked up with the next verse that he had left off with three years before. I've only been gone two months, but we're going right back to where we left off. We are now near the cross. After all these many years of journeying with Christ, it only took Him three years to live His life of ministry. It's taken us ten to follow Him and understand everything He taught and did. We have come finally now to the last two chapters of Luke's great gospel, chapters 23 and 24 which take us to the cross and to the resurrection.

For this morning's text, it's Luke 23 and verse 26 is where we will pick up the narrative of Luke. Luke chapter 23 and verse 26. However, to put the setting in our minds, I want to go back to verse 13 of Luke 23 and begin reading there.

Luke chapter 23 and verse 13. "And Pilate summoned the chief priests and the rulers and the people and said to them, 'You brought this man to me as one who incites the people to rebellion. And, behold, having examined Him before you, I have found no guilt in this man regarding the charges which you make against Him. Nor, has Herod. For he sent Him back to us. And behold, nothing deserving death has been done by Him. I will therefore punish Him and release Him,' for he was obliged to release to them at the feast one prisoner.

"But they cried out all together saying, 'Away with this man and release for us Barabbas.' He was one who had been thrown into prison for a certain insurrection made in the city and for murder. And Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again. But they kept on calling out saying, 'Crucify, Crucify Him.' And he said to them the third time, 'Why? What evil has this man done? I have found in Him no guilt demanding death. I will therefore punish Him and release Him.' But they were insistent with loud voices asking that He be crucified and their voices began to prevail. And Pilate pronounced sentence that their demand should be granted.

"And he released the man they were asking for who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, but he delivered Jesus to their will. And when they led Him away, they laid hold of one Simon

of Cyrene coming in from the country and placed on him the cross to carry behind Jesus. And there were following Him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting Him. But Jesus turning to them said, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children for behold, the days are 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 these things in the green tree, what will happen in the dry?’

“And two others also who were criminals were being led away to be put to death with Him. And when they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left.”

Having titled this message, or series of two messages, “Characters on the Road to the Cross...Characters on the Road to the Cross,” this is the final few steps to the execution of the Son of God. From Pilate’s judgment hall to Skull Hill, or Golgotha, in Hebrew, or Calvary in Latin, was only a short walk, a few hundred yards, a few minutes, but those were just the final steps, the final minutes.

The earthly journey to the cross actually began thirty-three years earlier. It began in a little village a few miles south of this very place, a village called Bethlehem, for there the earthly journey of the Son of God began and it began in a stable in a manger. It then progressed soon after His birth, south into Egypt for protection from Herod who wanted to murder Him. But then went from Egypt north past Jerusalem, into Galilee to an obscure non-descript town called Nazareth. And the journey seemed to go on hold for thirty years in the obscurity of that town.

And then, when the Son of God reached about the age of thirty, it was time to launch into His ministry and He went to the Jordan River, was baptized by John. Then progressed to Jerusalem where His first act was to cleanse the temple, as well as His last act three years later, bracketing His entire ministry with two cleansings of the temple, a clear declaration on the judgment that was to fall on apostate Judaism.

In the early months of His ministry after His baptism, He remained in Jerusalem and Judea and then progressed up to Galilee where for over a year He had a great ministry in Galilee. The final months of His three-year term of ministry were occupied in Judea, going from town to village to hamlet, around and around in that place proclaiming His messiahship, pronouncing the Kingdom of God, offering forgiveness and salvation. Eventually He came into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover for the last week of His life.

It is now Friday morning of that final week. He will be crucified on Friday afternoon. He will be dead before sundown and buried. And these are the last hours and the last minutes and the final steps to Skull Hill and the cross. Temporally it’s been a journey of 33 years.

But in reality, the journey started long before that. It started when there was no time and it started when there was no space, when there was no world, when there was no creation. It started in the infinite and eternal mind of the Trinity when it was determined that God would create and would redeem and would send His Son to pay the price of that redemption. And even those who would be redeemed had their names written down in a book before there was even a creation. The road to Skull Hill didn't really begin in Bethlehem, it began in heaven when the Son of God, not thinking His equality with God something to be grasped and held on to, abandoned, gave it up and came into this world. It all began in the councils of the Trinity.

And in a flash on a day that we celebrate as Christmas, the Son of God traversed the space between infinity and a finite world, between eternity and time, between the uncreated and the created realm. And now it's time for the last few steps. It's been a magisterial journey, it's been a supernatural journey. It's been an indescribable condescension. We have walked the earthly journey with Him for almost ten years we have walked with Him the three years. And now we will walk with Him the final steps to Skull Hill.

It's an unknown place. We don't know where it was. Oh there's a traditional site obscured by a Roman Catholic Church. And there's a non-traditional site called Gordon's Calvary, but we have no idea where Skull Hill really is, or was. And so it is that the creator of the universe goes to a non-descript, unidentifiable place to be killed by the very creatures that He Himself made. And some have concluded that this is kind of a sad ending to a good intention, that something really went wrong in the process of Jesus trying to lead people into the Kingdom of God. It all ended up with a big surprise. That is not true. That is not true. His steps to Skull Hill are simply the final steps of a journey begun in heaven in the infinite dwelling place of the eternal Trinity.

Every step, preordained, that is why the Bible says He is the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world. When He was just born, there was a shadow of a cross, as it were, across His manger. He had come to save His people from their sin. He said, "He had not come to be served but to serve and give His life a ransom for many." When it was time to take Him to the temple to have Him dedicated in the appropriate required ceremony, there He was confronted by a man named Simeon who clearly said inspired by the Holy Spirit that this child was going to be for the rising and the falling of many in Israel, and that because of what would happen to Him, a sword would be driven through the heart of His mother.

From the very beginning, it was clear that this would be one who would suffer. He said repeatedly, and we read it through the book of Luke, chapter 9, chapter 12, chapter 13, chapter 17, chapter 18, chapter 19, "I must die. I will be arrested. I will be scourged. I will be spit upon. I will be crucified. I will rise again." He has said it again and again and again and again.

In the twentieth chapter of the gospel of Luke, He told a story about a man who had a vineyard, who put it in the hands of caretakers, who wanted to come back and find out what his product was and take what was rightfully his. So he sent servants to gain for him what the vineyard had produced. And those who were caring for the vineyard mistreated the servants and killed them and he thought, “I’ll send my son, surely they’ll treat him correctly.” He sent his son and they killed him. And this was Jesus telling a story about how Israel treated the prophets and how they were about to treat Him. This is no surprise.

By the way, the temple where Simeon pronounced that early prophecy was only a few steps away from Skull Hill and from Pilate’s judgment hall. It’s as if His life has become full circle. And though the final steps of our Lord are brief, short distance, and I suppose could be easily passed over, because they really don’t introduce anything to us that we don’t already know, but Luke doesn’t leave out any critical detail, and so in the final few steps, in the final few moments, we meet some characters on the road to Skull Hill who help us understand the whole purpose of God in redemption and how people respond. We meet the mixed murderers. We meet a supporting stranger. We meet again the curious crowd. We meet some weeping women. And then we meet two companion criminals. And they’re not here incidentally, they’re here because they’re instructive to us as to the purposes of God.

And, of course, even though these are the characters along the road, the main character is Jesus. For on the final journey to the cross, He’s the only who speaks and rightly so, and He only speaks once and He only speaks on one subject, and it is judgment. But amazing things happen, particularly to the supporting stranger, whom we will meet this morning, and to one of the two criminals.

It’s a riveting story. I’ll try to tell it to you today and next week. Let’s begin with the mixed murderers. We are very familiar with them. We know them well. Verse 26, “And when they led Him away...” They? When they led Him away?

You have to go all the way back to verse 13. “Pilate summoned the chief priests and the rulers and the people.” The chief priests would be the Sadducees who ran the temple operation, the high priest, the former high priests who were all related to one another. The rulers would be the Sanhedrin, made up predominantly of scribes and Pharisees, as well as Sadducees, the collective quote/unquote spiritual leadership of Israel. The people would be the rabble that the leaders had collected against Jesus, a growing number of people in that early morning on Friday, people who were being orchestrated and manipulated into crying for the crucifixion of Jesus. This is they. It is they who led Him away. Verse 33, “And when they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him.”

This is a mixed group. You’ve got the Sadducees who had nothing to do with the Pharisees. They resented them. They resented their theology. They had nothing in common except a common hatred for Jesus.

You can throw in some Herodians who had nothing to do with the Sadducees or the Pharisees. They were a completely separate party. And they had no common ground except hatred of Jesus.

And then you have to throw the Romans in because the Romans were the human instruments that the Jews used to execute Jesus. It is this mixed mob of murderers, if you will, who lead Jesus away. They are theological enemies, normally. They are political enemies, normally. They are rigid adversaries, agreeing only on their common animosity toward Christ.

The verb, “led Him away,” apago, is used especially as a legal term, leading someone to trial, leading someone to punishment, leading someone to prison, leading someone to execution. It is so used in a technical way in the twenty-third and the twenty-fourth chapter of Acts, for example, with regard to Paul and his trials.

So, here you have the accumulated mixture of those who hate Jesus with lies, manipulations, intimidation, threats. They have pulled off the greatest miscarriage of justice that could ever be pulled off in American history because this is the most innocent person who ever lived. Pilate knows He’s innocent. He affirms it three times. Pilate’s wife knows He’s innocent, she warns her husband. Herod knows He’s innocent. The Jews know He is innocent.

But apart from all of that, they are driven by their relentless devotion to their own self-righteousness and He stands in the way of that and so they want Him dead. It is the worst example of apostasy, religious apostasy ever, killing the Messiah of God. It is the worst miscarriage of justice ever, executing as a criminal the perfectly righteous Christ. These are the mixed murderers.

By the way, there are always such in the world. They may not be the dominant group in the world, but there are always those who hate Jesus. We have them with us today. There is a flourishing and developing new kind of atheism that hates God and resents the biblical Jesus. There will always be those who hate Christ. There will always be those who mock Christ. There will always be those who heap scorn on the Lord Jesus Christ and they are represented by the mixed multitude that press for His death.

But against the backdrop of the mixed murderers is the second character we meet, I call him the supporting stranger. The name is familiar to us, Simon of Cyrene, perhaps the man is much less familiar to us. Back to verse 26, “When they led Him away,” and, of course, predominantly this movement of Jesus would be driven by the Roman soldiers. They were the ones who were the executioners, therefore they were the ones who took the victim to His execution. They were not alone, they were, of course, accompanied by all of these religious leaders as well, and the rabble that were following.

But when they led Him away, particularly the Roman soldiers, they laid hold of one Simon of Cyrene, actually they seized the man is what it says. They had absolute authority, by the way, the Roman soldiers did, over all citizens. They had absolute authority over all citizens. Jesus makes reference to that in the Sermon on the Mount.

In this case, they seize a man standing there.

Now this might appear on the surface to be nothing more than Roman whim, nothing more than random choice. But you get past that pretty quickly because this man has a name. None of the Roman soldiers are named. There's even a Roman centurion who believes and we don't know his name. But here is a man with a name. And not only a name, Simon, but a town, Cyrene. And not only that, Mark who also tells us about him as does Matthew, Mark identifies this man as Simon of Cyrene who is the father of Alexander and Rufus. So we have a man with a name and a town and a family.

It says they seized Simon of Cyrene. Cyrene, by the way, was a region in north Africa which would be today in Libya. It might be familiar to you if you remember the term from the Second World War, Tripoli. That's the area of Cyrene, north Africa. Simon is a Jewish name, Hebrew name, like Simon Peter. He is a Jew. He lives in Cyrene.

Not unusual. Josephus tells us Cyrene in north Africa was a center of Jewish population. So there were many Jews living in Cyrene. In fact, these Jews were devout and loyal and in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost, when Jews came from all over the world not only to the Passover, but many of them stayed, of course, for forty days later came Pentecost, we find that when the Spirit of God came on those in the Upper Room and they went out and spoke the wonderful works of God, they spoke in the language of the Cyrenians who had gathered there at Pentecost. So we're not surprised to meet a Jew from Cyrene.

According to the sixth chapter of Acts, there was actually a synagogue called the synagogue of the freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians. Alexandria, of course, being in the north part of Africa as well.

So, there were so many Jews in the north African region that they had their own synagogue in Jerusalem. Some of them had then left their countries and were living in Jerusalem and had their own meeting place. So when they came from Cyrene for things like the Pentecost event, the Passover event, they would attend a synagogue of their own countrymen and their own language. So we meet this man.

But still we could ask this question...why in the world is this man named? He doesn't seem like he plays any significant role. It all seems very random. They seized this man and it says "Coming in from

the country." Very important. This let's us know that this man had nothing to do with all that had preceded. He just arrived at Passover. We can't assume that he knew anything about Jesus. He doesn't live in Israel. Jesus never went to his town, to his country. He just came to the Passover as a devout Jew. He walks in from the country, comes through the city gates and walks right into this entourage, this huge crowd of very important leaders as well as people, and this strange parade with the main feature being a man carrying a cross. He has just arrived because this is Friday, to celebrate the Passover. He's no part of the previous proceedings, he's a stranger, perhaps even to Jesus. Unless he had come into the city earlier in the week on some occasion and heard Jesus in the temple, he wouldn't have known anything about Him.

But he meets Him now in a most amazing way. And while it might appear to you that this is a random thing on the part of the soldiers, this is far from random on the part of God. That's why he has a name. And they do something very unusual. It says they placed on him the cross to carry behind Jesus.

Why is this unusual? Because Roman law said the victim must carry his own cross to his own execution. It was part of the humiliation. And Jesus did that. John 19:17, "Jesus went out bearing His own cross." He started out of Pilate's judgment hall carrying His own cross. And scholars discuss how much of the cross was He carrying? Was He actually carrying just the patibulum, as the Latin word describes the crosspiece? Was it just that that was stretched across the back of His neck and His shoulders? And He was carrying that huge piece of lumber? Or was He actually carrying the entire cross, dragging behind Him the long centerpiece?

Most scholars would say, and perhaps it's correct, that He was carrying the crosspiece, that seems to be traditional. However, Luke has a very interesting way to say this. He says in verse 26, "They placed on him...on Simon...the cross to carry behind Jesus." Behind Jesus? The language here could indicate to us that Jesus actually was dragging the entire cross and that the back, the long piece of the cross was bumping along the cobblestones as He ascended the hill. And that what happened was, in order to expedite things, still not violating Roman law, they seized Simon, pulled him out of the crowd and asked him to pick up the tail end of the cross, put it on his own back and assist Jesus in the carrying of it.

In any case, he carried the cross, whether a part of it or all of it, together with Jesus. There's no reason given for us in Scripture as to why the soldiers did this. Volumes have been written about Jesus being exhausted, depleted of His strength because of the beating that He took in the scourging, weak because He hadn't slept all night, because He had been sweating, as it were, great drops of blood in the garden in the agonies of the torturous temptation there. The deprivation of His own physical body and strength, as well as the absence of all His friends, the mental anguish, the torture of going to the cross had so depleted His perfect human strength that He needed help. That's certainly possible. The Bible doesn't say that.

It could be just as well that the Romans were irritated by the fact that He couldn't move faster and the crowd was wanting to get Him to the cross and get Him executed as quickly as they could, getting it over with as fast as possible. And they were discontent with the way that Jesus was moving slowly under the great burden. We don't know.

But we do know that whatever went on with the wood of the cross and whatever motivated that isn't nearly as important as what was going on with Simon. So there's no sense in speculating about the cross, whether he was carrying a part of the cross, only the crosspiece and Simon carried all of that, or whether he helped Jesus carry that or whether he picked up the bottom because Christ had the whole cross isn't important. What is important is the man, not the wood.

And the man is identified as Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus. Matthew introduces us to Simon. Luke introduces us to Simon. Mark 15:21 introduces us to his two sons. Why does Mark do that? And Mark doesn't explain, why would you say this is Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus? Why would you say that unless you knew the readers would know who that was? You're trying to sort this Simon out from a lot of other Simons, why would you do that unless there was a familiarity with this man.

Now remember, Mark wrote his gospel in Rome. And Mark wrote his gospel between 50 and 60 A.D. The book of Romans was written about 56. It is possible the gospel of Mark was written after the book of Romans so that there's already a church in Rome and there are people in that church known, well-known. And if you go to Romans 16:13, you will meet one of the people in that church. Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord, an elect man in the Lord. Also his mother and mine, Paul says.

Wow. Simon of Cyrene, Mark writes. And then he says because he's writing in Rome and the first readers will be the Romans, the Roman church, "The father of Rufus and Alexander." You know them. And Rufus is an elect man in the Lord and so is his mother. Wow, that would be Simon's wife who had somehow become like a mother to Paul. Amazing...amazing.

Here's a stranger plucked out of nowhere to help Jesus carry the cross. We are unfamiliar with him, he's unfamiliar with Jesus, but believe me, he goes all the way to the cross and nobody having done that and arrived at the cross would leave. And so he experiences the full reality of the crucifixion. And somewhere in the process he follows the story until he embraces the gospel of the Christ whose cross he carried. And his wife becomes a believer and for sure his sons become believers and are known to the church. And one of them, Rufus, becomes an outstanding choice servant of the Lord. And this family becomes critical to the unfolding of the Kingdom so that they actually have a ministry in the life of the Apostle Paul and Simon's wife is like a mother to him.

And in Acts chapter 11 and verse 20, it says there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. Wow. Guess what. There's a church now in Cyrene. There's a church that's growing and developing and out of that church are coming preachers...preachers who preach the Lord Jesus and they're being sent as missionaries to Antioch. From north Africa to Antioch, way north of Jerusalem come preachers from Cyrene.

And, at least one of those preachers who came to preach the Lord Jesus from Cyrene all the way to Antioch, stayed in Antioch and became one of the pastors in the church in Antioch that sent Paul out. Acts 13, "There were in Antioch in the church that was there, preachers and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of...what?...Cyrene."

Out of nowhere, plucked out of the crowd by some witless, cruel Roman soldiers is a man commandeered to carry a cross who becomes the instrument by which the Lord establishes a church in Cyrene from which the gospel goes to Antioch and from Antioch Paul is sent to proclaim the gospel to the world. The purposes of God, providences of God unfolding at a moment when Jesus looks like a total victim. He is not. He is not.

Many reject Him. But then there are the few...the thief, the centurion and the Cyrenian. And God plucks them by His grace out of the crowd for divine purposes. And so He has done in your life if you belong to Him. And whatever little part of Kingdom history He's using you to write, one day you will be able to look back with all those in glory and see. Simon just walked in from the country out of nowhere and through his life, well-known to the believers in Rome, God did a great work, a church is established, missionaries are sent, Antioch is influenced, Antioch sends Paul to the world. No wonder his name is here.

Well, there are some more characters on the way, but we'll meet them next time.

Our Lord, we thank You for the wonderful evidence again of Your power. And though details of the story are not given to us, we know that You did something with this man's life that was sovereign, as it were, was out of the blue, snatched him up, connected him to Jesus Christ in a unique way which no other human being ever had, carrying the cross of Christ. And You so drew him to Christ that one day he took up his own cross to follow Christ. What a contrast against the dark backdrop of the haters, the mixed murderers is a supporting stranger, the work of sovereign grace and power. Jesus doesn't seem to us at all a victim, but rather a victor, triumphantly gathering around Him those who will fulfill His plan to change the world, even when the world is doing its worst Your purposes are on course.

We thank You, Lord, that You have graciously numbered us among the few, that You have plucked us up out of our ignorance and unbelief and You have graced us to love Your Son and to be loved by

Him. We thank You for the privileges that are ours and the opportunities that are ours and we can only pray that our story in some way may be like that of Simon, that You used us here and You used us there and in exponential ways that we can't understand here, we were part of Your great work. We thank You, first of all, that we have a name written in the Lamb's Book of Life and we have a history some written and some yet to be written. And may all that is written be honoring to You. Use us, Lord, for Your glory, we pray in Your Son's name. Amen.

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