

Grace Lutheran Church
40 N. Main St., Hatfield, PA 19440
April 10, 2022 + Palm/Passion Sunday
Luke 2:14-23:56: "A Black Man on a Bad Day"
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

The day that became known to world history as Good Friday started out joyfully for Simon of Cyrene. He was nearing the end of an arduous three-week journey to Jerusalem from his hometown on the North African coast of what is now Libya. Spring had come to the Mediterranean, and his route took him past spectacular waterfront views, through Alexandria and up through the arid land of southern Israel, past Bethlehem, into Jerusalem.

As a native African, Simon was likely raised in an atmosphere of racial tolerance. Cyrene was originally a Greek settlement, but by then had grown to be a diverse city home not only to Africans, Greeks and Romans, but also to a large Jewish population. Due to strong Jewish influence, Simon's family may have converted to Judaism at some point. This would explain why he was heading to Jerusalem: He was making a pilgrimage for the annual Passover celebration.

As Simon drew near his destination, he was hungry, thirsty, and very tired. This final leg would take him into Jerusalem through the Damascus Gate, where he could then make his way through the crowds to to the temple.

But as he began to approach the gate he noticed a great commotion up ahead. People were shouting, clamoring, and wailing, but he couldn't understand what they were saying. Then he spied a contingent of Roman soldiers surrounding a lanky, bent-over man in a thin tunic who was bleeding from his head. The soldiers were trying to force him to carry a huge wooden plank, but he appeared to be too weak.

Simon would had some knowledge of Roman execution practices, so he quickly recognized the hulking piece of wood as the heavy crossbeam upon which this poor man would shortly be crucified. Simon shook his head in compassion for the man, but resolved to continue on. As he tried to push his way past the crowd, one of the soldiers grabbed him roughly, pulled him next to the bleeding man, and thrust the heavy wooden beam into Simon's hands. "Carry this, and march!" the soldier growled at him. Quickly surrounded by other soldiers, Simon had no choice but to lay the beam across his own broad shoulders and make his way forward as the man in the tunic stumbled along beside him.

Now that Simon was in the midst of the crowd, he could make out what the people were shouting and wailing: "Messiah! Lord! Savior! This man is innocent! Jesus, what have we done to you?" He suddenly realized like a sucker-punch to the gut that this must be the one of whom he had heard--the great teacher, the rabbi, the miracle worker, the one who freed people of demons, the one on whom the hopes of all Israel had been placed. What terrible miscarriage of justice had transpired, Simon wondered, that that this leader, the hope of the nations, had been condemned to die?

Typically, criminals sentenced to crucifixion were made to publicly carry their own crossbeam as a sign of humiliation. (the vertical foundation of the cross was already in place.) Because Jesus was so weak from his beating, the Roman soldiers had the authority to draft a bystander to perform this labor instead.

But why Simon? Why did the soldiers compel Simon for this nightmarish task? In all likelihood, because of his race. The belief that white signified good and black signified evil was deeply embedded in Greco-Roman mind. And how much easier, as well, for the soldiers to seize a black man, one with intimate knowledge of systemic oppression who knew how futile it would be to resist, than someone who might have turned out to be a local Roman citizen and simply shrugged them off?

The culmination, then, of what should have been a joyful pilgrimage for Simon had turned very bleak indeed. It was the very image with which our nation is all too familiar--a black man on a bad day.

But we cannot leave Simon there, for neither his story nor Jesus' ends at Golgotha. In fact, because the gospels give us a window into Simon's predicament, we must believe that Simon's encounter with Jesus turned out to be a life-altering experience, one in which the final message was not oppression but hope.

Simon not only saw up close an innocent man murdered. He also saw, up very close, something he never imagined possible: the opportunity to look directly into the eyes of the Son of God. There he saw not only the anguish of all that Jesus' own people had done to him, he who had longed to shelter Jerusalem under his wings. Simon also saw something far deeper than that anguish, something that transcended time and space --very gaze of God turned directly on him, enveloping him in a love that is for all people, all times, all nations, and all races.

We don't know what became of Simon of Cyrene. The gospels don't mention him again after this. Mark, though, identifies Simon as father of Alexander and Rufus. In Romans 16:13, written about 25 years after Jesus' death, Paul says to greet Rufus and his mother. Could this have been Simon's son and wife, indicating that they were by then central members of an early Christian community in which Simon had gone on to become a leader?

I think this is more than remotely possible. What that would mean is that this bad day for this black man was in fact the beginning of new life. Simon was certainly still in Jerusalem a few days later, so he would have heard all about how the women found the tomb empty early on Sunday morning and then how Jesus had appeared to the disciples. Imagine his amazement and gratitude to God in realizing he had been called into service in such a profound way.

You know, though, who Good Friday WAS a bad day for? Peter. At the Passover meal on the last night of his life, Jesus, knowing what Peter would go on to do, tells him that he has prayed for him that his strength may not fail. Peter, perhaps flustered at the very suggestion of his strength failing, quickly shoots back: "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!"

But as we heard, as soon as Jesus was arrested, Peter went on to publicly deny, three separate times, even knowing Jesus.

What may we take from this brief mention of Simon of Cyrene, a shadowy figure that quickly passes in and out of the Gospels usually without notice?

Simon's encounter with Jesus could have ended dismally. As he trudged toward Golgotha he could have grumbled under his breath at the heavy load, keeping his gaze focused on the ground. At the place of crucifixion, he could have thrown down the beam and pushed past the soldiers back onto the main road. He could have complained for years about this rude interruption of his pilgrimage.

But we must think not. We must think God used his life for this great purpose and, that in so doing, Simon did his part to bring in the kingdom and change the world.

What experiences in your life that seem to be negative can actually be used by God for the proclamation of the gospel, if you let them? A missed job opportunity? The collapse of your family business? A serious illness? A devastating loss? How can your voice, your experience, your life, in the midst of such calamities be a source of strength, hope and healing for others, as you find that God's loving gaze has been turned fully and completely onto you?

Listen, then, to how God is calling you to serve God's purpose in ways that may seem mysterious at the time but turn out to be prophetic. When these opportunities arise, let yourself be compelled into service just as Simon of Cyrene was. And see what God can do!

Amen.