"The Heavier Cross"
Luke 23:26-38

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5 Lent
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Boise, Idaho
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I. Simon's Cross

Now as they led Him away, they laid hold of a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, who was coming from the country, and on him they laid the cross that he might bear it after Jesus (Lk. 23:26). So begins the Gospel lesson for this night, and it is no surprise that Simon has to be compelled to carry the Savior's cross. The badly-beaten and bloodied Jesus is led out of Jerusalem toward Calvary, and He is forced to carry His own cross according to the Roman custom. However, the Son of God has been savaged to the point where He is too weak to bear the load, and He falters on the way to the Place of the Skull. Who will carry it? Not the Roman soldiers; they are hardly disposed to help those whom they are sent to kill. Not the chief priests and scribes; if they touch the beam already stained with the Savior's blood, they will be unclean for Passover-they do not want to mar their "righteousness." Not the multitude that follows-no one is going to jump in and help the Man that everyone so clearly wants dead.

And so it is left to Simon from Cyrene, in the wrong place at the wrong time. He is forced into the task of bearing the cross. Despite his apparent reluctance at first, he is remembered and respected by the Church throughout the ages, because he assisted the Savior on the way of suffering. It is Simon who shoulders the heavy, scabrous cross and bears it after the Son of God.

The procession moves onward, passing by the Daughters of Jerusalem who weep at the sight of the brutalized Savior. Up the hill it continues, with the thieves and the Roman executioners. Although he will live past the day, there is little doubt that Simon feels a sense of the suffering and shame of those who are condemned. He struggles with a heavy, awkward, be-slivered beam of wood, a task that by itself must leave him weak, bruised and breathless. He walks behind the Savior against whom is hurled every sort of insult and mockery. He walks a few steps in the steps of the condemned Christ, and there is little doubt that he wants to be anywhere but there.

Make no mistake about it. The load that Simon carries is hardly light and easy. It is heavy and repulsive, and Simon may be filled with terror as he struggles under the load.

But make no mistake about this, too: While Simon's cross is heavy, the cross that Jesus carries up that hill is infinitely heavier.

The Savior does not carry a literal, wooden cross up the hill. I do not refer to that. Nor do I mean the injuries He has already sustained, though we might call that suffering a cross in itself. No, these tax and hurt the Lord on His way to His death, but He bears a heavier cross still. We hear of the true weight in our Old Testament lesson tonight:

Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. (Is. 53:4-5)

The Savior's load is an infinitely-heavier cross, because He bears the sins of the world.

He bears the sins of Simon, the one who carries the wooden cross. He is going to die so that Simon can have eternal life, not an eternity of shame and sorrow. He bears the sins of the daughters of Jerusalem who weep along the way. They will know suffering, too; when Jerusalem is destroyed, they will see their children killed, themselves desecrated and destroyed. The Lord carries their sins to the cross so that they might be delivered to the New Jerusalem of heaven. He bears the sins of the soldiers who will drive the nails through His hands and feet, that they might be forgiven for their mockeries and violence. He even carries the transgressions of the rulers, the chief priests and scribes, so that they too might have the hope of heaven. The rulers don't care; they cry out, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God." But He does not save Himself…because He is busy saving them.

He bears the burden of our iniquity to the cross; Matthew 8:17 declares that He also bears the sicknesses and infirmities of all as well. The blindness of Bartimaeus is taken from the beggar and put on the shoulders of Christ; the disease of the ten lepers on the Samaritan border rests upon the Lord as well. He carries not just the injuries that He has received in the Praetorium. He carries all the afflictions of the world.

So, no matter how heavy the cross that Simon carries, Jesus struggles under a heavier burden as they climb the hill called Calvary. Tragically, many for whom the Lord dies will not believe in Him. Although He dies to save the world, many in the world will refuse the salvation, preferring death and destruction instead. But still the Lord struggles up the hill to die for the world, that He might save His people for eternity.

II. Bearing the Cross

Dear hearers in Christ, Christ has borne the weight of your sin and infirmity to the cross, too-for the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Is. 53:6). Therefore on this night, we give thanks to the crucified and risen Savior that He has suffered and died for us.

As we give thanks, we do well to heed the warning of the Lord's Law in the epistle for this night: Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter (I Pet. 4:16). Dear Christians, when you suffer, do not do so in such a way that you shame your Savior.

St. Peter does well to warn us, for by nature we do not want to bear any sort of cross at all. When we face affliction, we are tempted to declare that it is unfair, that we don't deserve to be singled out for any special suffering. We may even blame the Lord when overtaken by trial, accusing Him of falling down on the job, of forgetting to protect and care for us as He has promised. We are certainly attracted to a false theology of glory, to teachings that you will face only prosperity-and not suffering-if you are truly a Christian.

The sufferings we must bear often tempt us to doubt the Lord's love. We ought to see these sufferings as proof of the devil's hatred and the world's callous disregard, but our sinful nature moves

us to blame the Lord for the trials we must endure. The sin of doubt here is a terrible one: The Lord has already demonstrated His love for you by bearing the heavier cross and dying for you-will you now accuse Him of a lack of love?

As we are now deep within this penitential season of Lent, let us put another face on this sin: When we complain of the sufferings we must bear and believe that they are more than we deserve, we demonstrate what little regard and appreciation we have for the cross that Jesus bore for us.

Please do not misunderstand: Suffering is never enjoyable. But our response in suffering should never be the sinful blaming of God for our troubles. Rather, when we encounter trial and affliction, we look to the cross that Jesus bore for our help and hope.

The Son of God has borne the sins of the world to Calvary and destroyed their power there. He has carried the infirmities and sicknesses of all within Himself so that their days are numbered, too. Compared to the terrible cross that He has carried and done away with, the trials of the present time are merely a splinter, a sliver of suffering. They are no comparison to His cross, nor are they worthy to be compared to the glory that will be revealed in us (Romans 8:18).

Once again, please do not misunderstand-this news is Gospel, not Law. Our old Adam is at work to twist it. When our sinful nature hears that Jesus' cross was heavier than ours, it thinks that the message is "If Jesus can do it, you better do it, too. Since Jesus has suffered so much, you'd better get a stiff upper lip and be ready to put up with a lot more. If He can suffer so much, you'd best be prepared to suffer the little bit that you have to." That, dear friends, is hardly comfort-being ordered to be brave in the midst of suffering.

No, the message is one of Gospel and comfort. In the midst of your sufferings, you can be assured that Jesus has already borne the heavier cross for you. When plagued by sickness and injury, you can thankfully declare, "I am troubled by this now, but I will not be forever. Jesus has borne my sicknesses and infirmities to the cross and destroyed their power. The devil would love to see my body decay for eternity; but since Jesus has destroyed the power of sickness and death at the cross, He will raise me incorruptible on the Last Day" (cf. I Cor. 15:52ff).

When afflicted by guilt over past wrongs, we are comforted that Jesus has borne the heavier cross. So, with thanks, we declare, "The devil would use this guilt to prove to me my worthlessness, to convince me that God has no love for such a sinner as me. But the Lord declares that-out of love for me-He has borne my guilt to the cross and suffered for it there. Therefore, while my feelings of guilt show me my sinfulness, they do not separate me from God. Rather, they make me thankful that I, who so desperately need salvation, have been saved by Christ Jesus. He has born the heavier cross for me."

When troubled by worries and anxiety, we take heart: Jesus has overcome the world (John 16:33). While the devil would use such worries to torment us that God does not care, we know that Christ has overcome the world and conquered death-He will preserve us in the one true faith until life everlasting.

The Lord has borne the heavier cross for you. The crosses that you bear are not some vindictive act of God; the Father does not send to you suffering as if to say, "Have a little taste of what my Son went through." You are joined to the suffering and death of Jesus, but in the most painless of ways-

by the application of water and the Word in Holy Baptism (Romans 6:4). There at the font you share in His suffering and death-without any pain, for He has borne it for you.

Trials will come in this life, yes; but take heart in the Word of God from our epistle once more: Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy (I Pet. 4:12-13).

O Lord Jesus Christ, You are the One who became a curse on the timber-trunk of the cross for us. Make us partakers of this divine blessing. Let Your holy blood flow over us so that we thereby are washed of our sins and are given to drink of eternal life. O You eternal High Priest, let Your intercession redound to our good, so that in the power of the same we may benefit from Your holy suffering and may obtain forgiveness of sins. Amen (Gerhard, An Explanation of the History of the Suffering and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ, 244).