

“Compelled”
March 29, 2020

Mark 15:21-24

Seven hundred and eighty-three miles. That’s how far it was from Cyrene, in what we would refer to today as northern Libya, to Jerusalem. It’s approximately as many miles as it would be to travel from South Windsor, Connecticut, to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. To make such a comparison, however, sells this morning’s Gospel story short.

In the year 2020, if you drove straight through without stopping and averaged sixty miles per hour, you could make it from our Wapping Community Church parking lot to Milwaukee in a little over thirteen hours. If you were flying on a plane from Bradley Airport, the same trip would be considerably shorter.

In the ancient days of the New Testament, however, some two thousand years ago when Jesus was nearing the end of his life, it would have taken the average person at least a month to travel from Cyrene to Jerusalem. Whether someone walked or rode atop a donkey, getting all the way to Jerusalem from Cyrene was an epic, once in a lifetime journey.

Why would anyone want to undertake that kind of grueling, exhausting trip in the year thirty-three or thirty-four A.D.? Unless they were going to visit a loved one, there is probably only one other reason anyone would set out on a trek that far. And that reason was to be in Jerusalem, the holiest city in the Ancient world, during the feast of the Passover.

Faithful Jews from all over the Ancient world saved their money for years in order to be able to afford a trip to Jerusalem while Passover was occurring. For faithful Jews, in fact, this wasn’t just a trip. It was a pilgrimage. A pilgrimage that would have been at the top of countless bucket lists.

In this morning’s story from the Gospel of Mark, a man named Simon, who hailed from Cyrene, was one of those pilgrims. Having dreamed about the trip and planned for the trip for years of his life, Simon was undaunted by the number of miles from Northern Africa to Jerusalem. The end goal of arriving in Jerusalem for the highest of all Jewish holidays more than justified whatever challenging travel means it took to get there.

When Simon finally arrived in Jerusalem and figured out some sort of accommodations inside the city limits, he took to the streets. His goal was the same as any other Jew in the city that day. Make it to the temple to pray and be in the epicenter of the faithful during this Passover time filled with sacred ritual and tradition.

Making it to the temple, though, was easier said than done. The streets were teeming with people. Sidewalks were jammed full, five or six rows deep. And the closer you got to the temple, the more the bottleneck slowed the flow of the crowds.

The one thing Simon was able to do was work his way from the rear of the sidewalk to the curb near the street. It was slightly less claustrophobic in front of the crowd, as opposed to behind the crowd. And close to the street, Simon could see much more clearly where he was and where he was headed.

In the midst of all the singing and shouting and jostling for position, some in the crowd missed the spectacle that was unfolding in the streets. Not Simon, however. In front of his eyes, a few dozen yards away, Simon noticed a cohort of Roman soldiers marching intently down the block. “Just trying to keep the crowd in check,” Simon thought to himself.

But when the soldiers drew nearer, Simon could see a figure in the middle of all the soldiers. Straining his eyes, Simon eventually identified the figure as a man, a prisoner, clearly. And he was carrying a heavy wooden cross on his shoulders and across his back, hunched over and buckling under all the weight.

As the soldiers marched ever closer, Simon could tell by the tone in the soldier’s voices that they were losing patience with the man bearing the cross. Every time the prisoner slowed down, the Roman soldiers yelled at him. When the prisoner looked as though he was going to stop altogether, the Roman soldiers mocked him and threatened him.

Eventually it became abundantly clear the man carrying the cross could not bear the weight and walk one step further. Peering through the opening between a couple of soldiers, Simon witnessed the prisoner up close for the first time. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead and dripped onto the ground down below. There were fresh scars and cuts on his back and the man steadily lost blood from each open wound.

The prisoner’s hands were shaking as he struggled to maintain his grip on the cross. His feet, meanwhile, were dusty and dirty as he shuffled to a halt. Suddenly he collapsed to the ground and the cross would have fallen on top of him had a couple of the soldiers not reached over to grab it.

In any case, those Roman soldiers were not about to carry the cross themselves. They surveyed the crowd, looking for someone able bodied. A few moments later, a couple of them pointed over in my direction. I glanced around, hopeful they had singled out someone else. When they began walking directly towards me, unfortunately, I resigned myself to the inevitable.

“Hey you...yeah you! Get over here! Pick up this cross and let’s go!” It was definitely an order and not a request. And two fleeting thoughts went through my head. First, carrying the cross out to the hill beyond the city limits where people were crucified

was exactly the opposite direction from where I wanted to go. The temple was this way and the cross was back that way...

Second, as soon as I picked up the cross. I knew I would be rendered unclean. I could tell just by looking at the sweat and the blood stains on the wood that some of it would rub off on me and I would not be able to enter into the temple unless I changed clothes, washed myself thoroughly, and made myself clean for worship again.

In any case, I had no say in the matter. I was about to walk over to the soldiers and fulfill my duty when I surprisingly caught the eye of the man lying on the ground. He squinted a little, in physical agony and exhaustion. But while his eyes were fixated on me, I saw something else. It wasn't fear. It wasn't despair or desperation. It wasn't vulnerability.

Instead, I swear I noticed in his eyes a steady resolve. An unwavering sense of purpose. The dogged, tenacious expression of a man who endured everything the world could throw at him and refused to be broken.

In that instant, something changed in my own spirit. I tuned out the Roman guards, for the most part. And I shifted my focus to the man lying beneath the cross. Understanding for the first time that carrying the cross wasn't about me and what I wanted. Carrying the cross was about that man and what I could do for him...

This morning's Scripture lesson tells us that the Roman soldiers were the ones who "compelled a passer-by who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross." But if you were to ask Simon of Cyrene, his version of the story might be slightly different.

Yes, Simon was compelled to carry the cross. But maybe he felt compelled not by the Roman soldiers but rather by the man who could not carry the cross on his own one more step...

When Simon finished carrying the cross up the hill named Golgotha, the Roman soldiers informed him he was free to go. Yet Simon lingered a short distance away. He watched as the soldiers nailed the man to the cross and then raised the cross to vertical.

A part of Simon wanted to head back to the city of Jerusalem and make his way over to the temple again. The other part of him was mesmerized by the expression on the face of the man hanging. Still steady. Ever purposeful. Dogged and tenacious even as his breath shortened and his head began to bow. Unbroken, it seemed, at the moment he took his final breath...

There are times in life when we find the cross we have to carry. By the same token, there are times in life, as Simon of Cyrene discovered, when the cross we have to carry finds us. Either way, we put our faith in the one who compels us to follow him. And we trust him to go before us in life, in death, and in life everlasting. Amen.