

**A Journey through Lent: The Journey to Golgotha
2021-03-21 Sermon**

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[slide 1, blank] Based on popular culture and a 21st century environmental study,

corporate brand identity designer Al Amin has identified some of the world's most recognizable symbols.

[slide 2] They include, in no particular order, the Nike logo, the Apple logo, and the McDonald's logo.

Also on his list was the symbol of the cross. That shouldn't surprise us.

The cross adorns nearly every Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox church in the world.

Millions of people wear it as a piece of jewelry worldwide. You can't go to any cemetery without seeing a cross on a grave marker.

[slide 3, blank] Perhaps no symbol is referred to more often in sermons than the cross.

Nevertheless, we've become so accustomed to hearing about and seeing a cross in our culture that we can easily take it for granted.

Even the biblical stories that focus on the cross may sound so familiar to us that we can take them for granted.

And so, as we continue to relive Mathew's passion narrative,

I hope you will listen to today's message about the cross with open ears and receptive hearts

so that we can better understand what it means for us to take up our cross and follow Jesus.

Please open your Bible to Mt. 27. [slide 4] Today we are going to walk where Jesus walked on his final journey to the cross.

The path is not pleasant, but needs to be revisited if we hope to gain a realistic understanding of what it means for us to take up our cross and follow Jesus.

[slide 5] We learn from Matthew, in v.33 of c.27, that the place of crucifixion was called, "Golgotha [which means, 'the place of the skull']."

On numerous occasions in the gospels, Jesus had warned his disciples that he would be crucified and would rise on the third day.

[slide 6] We learned in last week's message, that prior to his crucifixion, Pilate had Jesus flogged.

The flogging itself was designed to inflict as much pain and punishment as possible, reducing the body to strips of raw flesh and inflamed, bleeding wounds.

Following the flogging, Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified.

[slide 7] Pilate's soldiers, in their own sadistic way, saw Jesus as a figure of comic relief.

Look at v.27, they "took Jesus into the Praetorium [or barracks] and gathered the whole [regiment] of soldiers around him.

²⁸ They stripped him and put a scarlet military cloak on him [symbolizing a royal robe],

²⁹ and then twisted together a crown composed of thorns and stuck it on his head.

They put a staff [symbolizing a royal scepter] in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said.

³⁰ They spat on him, [one of the severest expressions of disgust] and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again.”

That Roman soldiers would take the opportunity to taunt and abuse, humiliate and beat Jesus for entertainment, should not surprise us.

Such abuse of a condemned prisoner was commonplace.

[slide 8] Continuing in vs.31, “When they had finished mocking him, they took off the [military] cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.”

Leading Jesus away to be crucified involved parading him through the streets of Jerusalem to his place of execution, just outside the Garden Gate, about 300 metres north, northeast of Pilate’s palace,

carrying his own patibulum or crossbeam, weighing approx. 20 kgs, across his shoulders.

The Romans wanted as many people as possible to see how they administered justice.

Now we should note that several months prior to his crucifixion, Jesus said to his followers, in Mt. 16.24,

[slide 9] “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

What Jesus is proving to the world on the day of his crucifixion is that he was not the exception to the rule, rather, he was the example. He practiced what he preached.

As he was being paraded through the streets of Jerusalem on his way to Golgotha, around his neck hung a placard on which was written the charge against him.

This placard would later be nailed above him on the cross so that everyone who passed by would know the crime for which he is being executed.

It read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

[slide 10, blank] Though the gospel writers give us few details about Jesus' final walk to the site of his execution, they do give us one interesting detail.

"As they were going out" [of the city] v.32, "they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross."

Jesus has been tortured and beaten so badly that he stumbled under the weight of the crossbeam, unable to go on.

Preferring to have Jesus alive on the cross rather than die on the way,

the soldiers compel this spectator from the crowd, which had gathered to watch the execution, to carry the crossbeam.

[slide 11] That spectator was Simon, a Jew from the town of Cyrene, a seaport city in Libya, just west of Egypt.

Try to imagine the feelings of resentment Simon had at this moment.

He has made the long journey to Jerusalem, with his family, to realize the dream of attending the Passover Feast, the most important festival of the year for a Jew, yet he finds himself carrying a cross to Golgotha.

It may have been his intention that upon arriving at Golgotha he would fling the crossbeam down on the ground and flee the scene as quickly as possible.

[slide 12] Could it be that he stays and watches as the soldiers drive the spikes into Jesus' wrists and feet?

Could it be he hears Jesus utter words of forgiveness to those who crucify him?

Could it be he hears news of an empty tomb three days later, and seeks out one of Jesus' followers to learn more about the man whose cross he carried?

[slide 13, blank] The reason this could have happened is because Mark's gospel tells us in c.15 that Simon of Cyrene was the father of Alexander and Rufus.

Usually, you do not identify a man by the name of his sons unless these sons are well-known people in the community to which you are writing.

Mark is writing his gospel to the X'ns living in Rome. And it's worth noting that in Paul's letter to the X'ns in Rome, he writes in 16.13,

"Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too."

Could it be that this Rufus is the same Rufus who was the son of Simon of Cyrene, and his mother was Simon's wife?

Could it be that as Simon looked on Jesus while carrying his cross, Simon's bitterness turned to amazement and finally to faith;

that he became a follower of Jesus, and that his family came to faith as members of the church in Rome?

I think one of the reasons why Mt., Mk., and Lk., include the story of Simon carrying the crossbeam, is that it gives us a literal picture of a spiritual truth. And what is that spiritual truth?

[slide 14] As Jesus had said in Mt. 16.24, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

The disciples of Jesus understood what it meant to “take up a cross” because they were accustomed to the sight of condemned prisoners carrying their crosses.

When they saw a condemned prisoner carrying a cross, they knew that person had known sorrow and suffering, and had only one thing ahead of him - death.

[slide 15, blank] But what does it mean for us to take up our cross?

For us, “taking up our cross” does not mean putting up with an annoying roommate or having to live with an ingrown toenail.

It means dying to self, surrendering every area of our lives to Jesus so that he may live his life in and through us.

If we are to “come after” Christ, our lives are forfeit from the moment we begin following him.

Although we may fall short in our commitment at times, as did those first disciples,

if we desire to follow Jesus, we must understand from the start that we are surrendering our rights, our lives, to him, so that he may live his life in and through us.

Getting back to Matthew’s passion story, Jesus arrives at Golgotha, v.33. [slide 16] And **Golgotha was a place of suffering.**

Vs.34, “There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with [bitter herbs]; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it.”

Why? Because it was so bitter tasting. Bitter herbs, like myrrh, mixed with wine, would make it undrinkable.

This gesture by the soldiers, then, was not one of compassion, but of torment, a way to further amuse themselves.

Jesus suffered much at Golgotha. Then, says Matthew in v.35, "... they crucified him."

[slide 17, blank] While some features of crucifixions remained commonplace,

executioners could perform them in a variety of ways, limited only by the extent of their sadistic creativity.

For Jesus' crucifixion, he was stripped naked, adding to his suffering, his shame, and his humiliation.

Long metal spikes were driven into his wrists and feet. Then they hoisted him up on the cross.

Once up in the vertical position the process of death is essentially death by slow asphyxiation.

As the breathing slows down one goes into respiratory acidosis, which leads to heart failure. It was a horrendous and sickening sight.

Crucifixion was so horrendous that no Roman citizen was permitted to be executed this way without a direct edict from Caesar.

It was considered too inhumane, too undignified, for a Roman citizen.

And it didn't just involve physical pain and suffering. There was also emotional pain and suffering.

If you've ever been through a traumatic experience then you'll know that there are times when emotional pain and suffering can be far worse than physical pain and suffering.

While Jesus suffers on the cross, dying, we read in v.35 that the soldiers gambled for his clothing.

This was one of the small perks of the job, as Roman law allowed soldiers to seize the few possessions the condemned may have.

“Above his head,” v.37, “they placed the written charge against him. “THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

According to John’s account of events, members of the Sanhedrin had been unsuccessful in their attempts to persuade Pilate to change what he had written.

They felt it was written as a statement of fact.

But Pilate was sick and tired of these people and said, “What I have written, I have written.” He was unwilling to change it.

As a result, the religious leaders, along with others, hurled insults at Jesus and mocked him, functioning as Satan’s mouthpieces.

How were they functioning as Satan’s mouthpieces?

Recall in Mt. 4 that when Satan tempted Jesus in the desert he repeatedly used the phrase, “*If you are the Son of God...?*”

In vs.39ff, Matthew records, “Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads ⁴⁰ and saying,

“You, who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, *if you are the Son of God!*”

Jesus suffered much at Golgotha. Continuing in v.41, in the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him.

⁴² “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! He’s the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.

⁴³ He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, *'I am the Son of God.'*"

Look again at those words in v.42. Do you see what they said? They said, "He saved others."

In the midst of their insults and anger, they couldn't deny the truth. They accidentally paid tribute to Jesus by admitting, "He saved others."

The chief priests and teachers of the law hated Jesus with a passion. This was going to be their hour of triumph.

The one who had made them look foolish in front of the crowds, the one who had exposed their hypocrisy, was now getting his due. And they relished every minute of it.

Jesus suffered much at Golgotha. But Golgotha was not only a place of suffering, [slide 18] **Golgotha was also a place of sacrifice.**

We can sacrifice in different ways. For example, during this past year of dealing with the coronavirus, all of us have had to make some kind of sacrifice,

weather by increasing our personal hygiene habits, adhering to social distancing protocols, or by self-isolating.

I read of a guy's grandmother who was putting in the time and making the sacrifice to get healthy.

A few years ago, she started walking 5 kms a day, every day. That was three years ago. They have no idea where she is now. But she's healthy.

People are willing to sacrifice in different ways. But why was Jesus willing to sacrifice his life for us at Golgotha?

[slide 19] Here are **4 reasons** why Jesus was willing to sacrifice his life for us.

The 1st reason is **love**. Nails didn't hold Jesus to a cross, but love did.

As Paul writes in Rms. 5.8, "God demonstrated us his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

What then, is the 2nd reason why Jesus was willing to sacrifice his life for us?

[slide 20] The 2nd reason is **knowledge**. The religious leaders said in v.42, "Let him come down now from the cross, and [then] we will believe in him."

Now that sounds pretty good on the surface. But on closer examination, Jesus *knew* that their hearts were too hardened to even be open to change.

He *knew* he could prove more by facing death humbly than he ever could by saving his own life.

Think about it, if they weren't convinced by his teachings, by his the feeding of the 5,000,

by the raising of Lazarus from the dead, and by his many other miracles of healing,

then I really don't think they would have changed their tune if he had come down from the cross.

Years ago, songwriter David Meece wrote, "He could heal the sick, raise the dead, turn the sky from blue to red.

It didn't matter what he said or what they'd see, some people refuse to believe." Jesus *knew* it was best to stay on the cross.

What then, is the 3rd reason why Jesus was willing to sacrifice his life for us? [slide 21] The 3rd reason was the **forgiveness of sins**.

There was no other way for people to be forgiven their sins. As the writer of Hebrews clearly points out in 9.22, “Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness [of sins].”

And as Paul wrote in his letter to the church in Ephesus, 1.7, “In him [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us.”

And Luke tells us in Ac. 10.43, “All the prophets [in the OT] testify about him [Jesus] that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

What then, is the 4th reason why Jesus was willing to sacrifice his life for us? [slide 22] The 4th reason was **prophecy**.

Hundreds of years prior to Jesus birth, the prophets in the O.T. had foretold how the Messiah would come to die.

Isaiah 53 is the classic passage about this. It reads, in part, “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth;

he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

⁸ From arrest and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested?

For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished.

¹² He poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors.

For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”

And hear well these prophetic words from David in Psalm 22.

⁶But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people.

⁷All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads.
⁸“He trusts in the LORD,” they say, “let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.”

¹⁴I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me.

¹⁵My mouth is dried up like a [sun baked clay pot], and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death.

¹⁶Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircle me; they pierce my hands and my feet.

¹⁷All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me.¹⁸They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.”

If Jesus were to take the easy way out and come down from the cross, as all those people hurling insults at him were taunting him to do,

then all that prophecy would go out the window, the strong evidence for the Messiahship of Jesus would be gone,

and the work the Father had given him to do would not be completed – the world could not be saved.

[slide 23] Having said all that, we need to ask ourselves the question, “So what? What does this have to do with me?”

The answer is, “Everything.” The only way you and I can experience the forgiveness of our sins is if we realize that we were there at Golgotha.-

Not literally, of course, but all of us were represented there; represented by a truckload of sins that we have committed and have yet to commit.

That truckload of sins was backed up and dumped on Jesus on the cross.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Yes you were. And so was I. As Martin Luther so aptly put it, “We carry the nails in our pockets.”

Isa. 53.5 tells us, “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”

Golgotha was a place of sacrifice and suffering. [slide 24] **Golgotha was also a place of supernatural signs.**

When Christ died on the cross, there were 4 supernatural signs that occurred, which further validate that Jesus truly was and is the Messiah, the Son of God.

[slide 25] **The 1st supernatural sign was a deep darkness covering the land.** V.45, “From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land.”

For many Jewish people, this darkness would recall the pre-exodus event - the 3-day plague of darkness in Egypt. This darkness then would be interpreted as a sign of divine judgment.

In this case, it was the judgment of God upon the sins of everyone in the world; sins that were borne by Jesus on the cross.

What then, was the 2nd supernatural sign? [slide 26] **The 2nd supernatural sign was the temple curtain being torn in two.**

Look at v.51, when, at the moment Jesus died, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.”

This thick, heavy curtain served as a barrier between the holy of holies and the rest of the temple.

When this curtain was torn in two, from top to bottom, it symbolized a new, open access to God.

Prior to this, the only person who could go into the holy of holies, and intercede for the sins of the people, was the high priest. And he could do that only once a year.

But now, according to Heb. 10, every believer has access to God by the blood of Jesus.

You don't need a Temple building or an animal sacrifice, nor do you need a priest.

Jesus is the new Temple, he is your once for all sacrifice, and he is your high priest.

What then, was the 3rd supernatural sign? **[slide 27] The 3rd supernatural sign was a violent earthquake that shook the earth.**

V.51. "The earth shook, [and] the rocks split." Remember what happened following the 7.4 magnitude quake that hit off Japan's east coast in November 2016?

This quake generated a 14-meter high tsunami that swept over the Fukushima Nuclear Plants seawall which led to a level 7 nuclear event. People in Japan were terror-stricken.

The earthquake mentioned in Mt. 27, was, like the darkness, a symbol of divine judgment, leaving people terror-stricken.

What then, was the 4th supernatural sign? **[slide 28] The 4th supernatural sign was the bodily resurrection of the dead.**

Look at v.52. Following the earthquake "... the tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people, who had died, were raised to life."

Whaaat? Now that's incredible. I don't pretend to fully understand this, but I do understand that Matthew clearly intends this as a supernatural sign

to prefigure the final resurrection of the Lord's people on the day of his return.

[slide 29, blank] So, what are we to make of all this? What does all this mean?

What is the significance of this picture we've painted of Jesus journey to Golgotha; to a place of suffering, sacrifice, and supernatural signs?

We can learn a lot by how a person lives. But we can learn more by how a person dies. You don't believe me? Then don't take my word for it.

[slide 30] Ask the supervising Centurion, and those with him, the ones who would have been least likely to give a tribute on behalf of Jesus Christ.

You think your job's tough? There is no comparison to this Centurion's. Death was a part of his job.

He'd seen death in a hundred different ways. When a person died, he'd seen the look on all sorts of people's faces - anger, bitterness, shock.

He'd been spat upon and sworn at. But never before had he come face to face with a person like Jesus.

Look at v.54, "When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

[slide 31, blank] The significance of the cross is that we are no longer separated from God because of our sins.

Our sins, indeed everybody's sins, have been atoned for through the sacrifice of the Son of God, Jesus, on the cross.

He's dealt with our sin and now there are no longer any barriers between God and us.

We cannot fully comprehend this demonstration of extravagant love. Perhaps John says it best in what is arguably the most famous verse in the Bible,

"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Chuck Colson, who served as President Nixon's Special Counsel, and later founded Prison Fellowship, once said, "There have been hundreds and thousands of kings, princes, and presidents.

Whenever it comes time for a war, the same thing always happens. All those kings have one thing in common at that point. They all send their subjects out to die on their behalf.

There is only one King that went out and died on behalf of his subjects. His name is Jesus."

Will you take up your cross and follow him?

Let's pray. Here well the words of this old Puritan prayer:

O my Lord and Saviour, you have also appointed a cross for me to take up and carry, a cross before you give me a crown.

You have appointed it to be my portion, but self-love hates it, carnal reason is unreconciled to it;

without the grace of patience, I cannot bear it, walk with it, or profit by it.

O blessed cross, what mercies do you bring with you! You are only esteemed hateful by my rebel will, heavy because I shirk your load.

Teach me, gracious Lord and Saviour, that with my cross you send promised grace so that I may bear it patiently, that my cross is your yoke, which is easy, and your burden, which is light. Amen.