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Scripture: The Gift – Jesus as Sacrifice

I have been intrigued by this idea of a pilgrimage lately. Have you ever been on a pilgrimage? It is a journey or search that usually has some deeply personal or spiritual significance. Typically, it leads to some sort of shrine of importance but it can also be a metaphorical experience into your own beliefs or values. A person who makes such a journey is called a pilgrim.

When I was growing up, long before there were the Toronto Blue Jays baseball, my dad was a New York Yankee fan. I used to hear about players like Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Yogi Berra and the shrine where they played, Yankee Stadium. Last fall, while I was in New York City for the first time, I had a chance to go to see the Yankees play. It felt like a pilgrimage for me.

When I walked out of the subway and up the stairs and saw the Stadium before me in all its glory, I remember thinking, *Man, I wish my dad was here with me.* I know it is not the original Yankee Stadium but it still represented a piece of my childhood and connection to my father.

For many, a pilgrimage connects them to an important piece of their past or growing up years. Do you know that over 600 000 people make the pilgrimage to Graceland, the former home of Elvis Presley every year? It is now a shrine to his memory.

For others, a pilgrimage is a spiritual endeavour. For Muslims, it is a journey to their holy city of Mecca. For new agers, it might be a visit to Stonehenge in England.

For Christians, it may mean walking the 800 km Camino de Santiago, or the way of St James in Spain. It leads to the shrine of James the Apostle of the New Testament and it is one of the most popular pilgrimage routes today.

Have you ever been a pilgrim? Have you ever gone on a pilgrimage?

We are in this message series at North Park as we head for Easter that we have entitled, *The Gift 2.0*. It is 2.0 because it is meant to be a continuation of our Christmas series from 2018. You may remember it was entitled, *The Gift*. This is the second part of that series. At Christmas, our focus was on the three gifts that the Wise Men brought to the infant Jesus shortly after he had been born. These gifts, Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh all had a practical purpose at the time but were also deeply symbolic.

The Gold represented the Kingship of Jesus. Frankincense represented Jesus as the great High Priest and Myrrh represented the sacrifice that Jesus would make by giving his life on the cross. At the time the Wise Men gave these gifts to an infant Jesus the symbolism wasn't entirely clear but years later, as we now move to Easter, things are beginning to come into focus.

Two weeks ago, we looked at Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem on the last week of his earthly life. He led a parade. He doesn't walk into the city. He rides in on a Donkey representing that Jesus is the King, the promised Messiah of God. But he was to be different than any other King the world has known. He came in humility and his Kingdom goes beyond the boundaries of politics and nationalism. It is a Spiritual Kingdom that does not gain strength by violence and force but instead grows in the hearts of people who put their faith and trust in him.

Jesus, the gift from God did come to save humanity, but not from the Romans. He came to save us from ourselves, from our sin and apathy. He came to save us from a lost eternity and instead offers us life eternal in Him. He laid down his life for us, so that we could live.

So the question we were challenged with two weeks ago was, *how do we respond to this kind of King?*

Last week, we looked at the last supper Jesus had with his disciples before his death. It was during the Jewish festival of Passover. At the meal, Jesus redefines the significance of Passover.

He declares that his body and blood would now be the way to forgiveness of sins and salvation. No longer do the people need to sacrifice animals. Then Jesus, the Great High Priest and mediator between God and the people, washed his disciples' feet setting an example for them.

We were left with the challenge *will we do what Jesus asks us to do?* To follow him means we have to be willing to pick up the towel and basin and go into our world empowered by the Holy Spirit to humble ourselves. To go lower and serve others.

Today, we come to Jesus as sacrifice. That is what the gift of Myrrh represented when brought before the infant Jesus by the Wise Men. He is the sacrifice. Today, I don't want to preach to you but instead lead you on a pilgrimage, a bit of a meditative exercise.

Let me set it up this way. When I launched this Easter series, I used the metaphor of a parade. I stated that when Jesus came riding a donkey into Jerusalem in the last week of his earthly life, he led a parade. There were crowds of people lining the parade route laying down their coats and palm branches before Jesus. Singing and shouting hosanna. It was celebratory. But the people shouting, *Hosanna*, to him along the parade route at the beginning of the week were the same people who spit on him, beat him and jeered him with shouts of *Crucify him* as Jesus walked another parade route just five days later. It was a road that led him to Golgotha which ultimately took him to his destiny, the cross.

Why their sudden change of heart? They were distraught that Jesus wasn't the sort of Messiah they were anticipating. They wanted a King that would conquer their enemies not bow before them. So, they had him killed. After he was sentenced to die by Pilate, Jesus was beaten, mocked and spit upon by the Roman Soldiers, then he was forced to carry his own cross through the streets of Jerusalem to Golgotha where he was crucified. This second

parade route that Jesus walked on the day he was killed is called the *Via Dolorosa* or the way of suffering.

As we head into the Passion Week this Easter, I wanted us just to take some time to travel that road with Jesus. To ponder and reflect upon what it means to us that he is our sacrifice.

If you have ever visited Jerusalem this may be a pilgrimage that you have actually taken. You have walked the path that Jesus took to Golgotha and you may have noticed that along the way, there are 14 *Stations of the Cross* which commemorate certain incidences that took place along this parade route in the final hours of Jesus' life.

These stations are in place to help Christians on this pilgrimage truly contemplate the Passion of Christ. What it meant for him to be our sacrifice. Since many people are not able to make the trek to Jerusalem, art work of these Stations of the Cross can be found in many Western churches, most predominately Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican churches.

Today, I want to have a brief look at eight of these stations that are in scripture. I really want to invite you into this pilgrimage with Jesus and encourage you to ponder all that transpired leading up to Jesus' death for you and for me.

I also hope that we can recognize that life is sometimes dark and it has endings. That reality faced Jesus. But God does some of his best work in the darkness as we persist in the journey, even when it heads toward Golgotha. Resurrection Sunday has no meaning without Good Friday. Light has so much more meaning when it comes out of the darkness.

Let's pray for open hearts as we begin this journey.

I invite you to join with me along the Via Dolorosa with Jesus.

Station #1 Pilate Condemns Jesus to Die.

Matthew 27:11-14, 24, 26

Now Jesus was standing before Pilate, the Roman governor. "Are you the king of the Jews?" the governor asked him. Jesus replied, "You have said it."

But when the leading priests and the elders made their accusations against him, Jesus remained silent. "Don't you hear all these charges they are bringing against you?" Pilate demanded. But Jesus made no response to any of the charges, much to the governor's surprise.

Pilate saw that he wasn't getting anywhere and that a riot was developing. So he sent for a bowl of water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood. The responsibility is yours!"

So Pilate released Barabbas to them. He ordered Jesus flogged with a lead-tipped whip, then turned him over to the Roman soldiers to be crucified.

Isn't there something in you that just wishes that Jesus would speak up? Just tell him who you are, Jesus! If Jesus won't speak, there must be someone in the crowd that will speak up for him, isn't there? What about all those people he healed? What about all those people that he fed? What about those who followed him when things were going well? Where are they now? No one speaks up. No one comes to his defense.

Have you ever been alone or have been falsely accused of something or been treated unfairly? Has anyone spoken up for you? Maybe there have been times in your past when you have treated someone unfairly. The treatment they got from you, they didn't deserve or maybe you kept quiet when you have witnessed someone around you being treated poorly. You wish you would have spoken up. It is easy for us to make Pilate the scapegoat for his cowardly actions but how many times have we taken the easy path instead of the right path?

In his silence, Jesus reveals a quiet strength of peace and resolve.

As we ponder each station of the cross we will say a prayer together. Will you pray with me what is on the screen?

Lord, help us to deal with the unfairness of life without becoming critical of others. Help us to be more sensitive to the pain and feelings of those around us. Give us the courage to do what is right without being swayed by the demands of others.

Station #2 Jesus accepts His Cross.

Matthew 27:27-31

Some of the governor's soldiers took Jesus into their headquarters and called out the entire regiment. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him. They wove thorn branches into a crown and put it on his head, and they placed a reed stick in his right hand as a scepter.

Then they knelt before him in mockery and taunted, "Hail! King of the Jews!" And they spit on him and grabbed the stick and struck him on the head with it.

When they were finally tired of mocking him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him again. Then they led him away to be crucified.

John 19:17

Carrying the cross by himself, he went to the place called Place of the Skull (in Hebrew, Golgotha).

You have to admit that the thorns driving into Jesus' skull would make him cringe with pain but perhaps the humiliation and degradation would hurt much worse. The people expected Jesus to come with power and here he seems so helpless. In our world, are we willing to give up our human preoccupation with power and control and instead take the role of a servant like Jesus? To pick up the towel and basin and follow him?

Here's the thing. Even in spite of the way he was treated, Jesus still accepts the cross. He could have refused. I mean, what else could they have done to him? He knew where this journey was headed but he uttered no words of complaint, no protests of his innocence, no cursing the injustice of it all.

I am challenged by the way I can complain and whine about even the most trivial of things. I can fall easily into self-pity when those around me have bigger crosses to bear. Jesus accepted his cross without pity. Can we follow his example? Let's pray together.

Jesus, forgive us when we forget that in our weakness, we are driven to trust in you. Forgive our attitudes of self-pity that makes us more pathetic than loving. We do not seek crosses to bear but

when they come, give us strength to hold them as you do.

Station #3 Simon Helps Carry the Cross.

Mark 15:21

A passerby named Simon, who was from Cyrene, was coming in from the countryside just then, and the soldiers forced him to carry Jesus' cross. (Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus.)

I don't know if we can imagine the weight of the beam of the cross Jesus was forced to carry along this parade route. It was probably over 100 pounds of rough wood that scrapped along the raw flesh wounds of his beaten back as he struggled to make his way along the road. We are not sure how many times he stumbled and fell along the way but his weakening condition must have been evident as the Roman soldiers force a man from the crowd, Simon to help carry the cross the rest of the way to the crucifixion site. They didn't want to risk Jesus dying of exhaustion before they have had their fun with him on the top of that hill.

I don't know about you, but I would like to think that if I had been there, I would have rushed out from the crowd and volunteered to carry the cross for Jesus. But would I have really risked my own life to ease his suffering for even a few moments? Just to let him know that he wasn't alone?

The fact is, I already have a lot on my plate without taking on the added burdens of others. Do you ever feel that way? The truth is, sometimes when I see needs around me, I try to become invisible or convince myself that I am too busy but then the words of Jesus come to mind.

Luke 9:23

"If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me.

The reality is, if I want to follow Jesus, I am called to pick up my cross every day and so are you.

Let's pray,

O Lord, forgive me for being so preoccupied with myself that I become blind to the needs of those around me. Remind me daily, that I cannot love you without loving others as well. Help me to remember

that to be a Christ follower means to share in the burdens of others.

Station #4 Jesus speaks to the Women.

Luke 23:27-31

A large crowd trailed behind, including many grief-stricken women. But Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, don't weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are coming when they will say,

'Fortunate indeed are the women who are childless, the wombs that have not borne a child and the breasts that have never nursed.' People will beg the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and plead with the hills, 'Bury us.' For if these things are done when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

As Jesus is struggling along this road to his gruesome fate, a group of women in the crowd are following him. They are already grieving his impending death. With all that is going on with Jesus at this moment, the excruciating pain, the crowds taunting and knowing what lays ahead of him, he stops and takes time to speak to these women. He is about to die and he is more concerned about others than his own suffering.

But his words here seem strange and out of place. He is speaking of darker days ahead for the people. Is it possible that Jesus' death is only the beginning of things that they/we will weep about? Jesus often spoke about repentance. That is, calling people to turn from the ways they are living apart from God, away from their sin and turn back to Jesus. Is it possible that the stubbornness of people, refusing to repent is what will cause all of this future grief and sorrow that Jesus refers to here?

Do we see the pain and destruction that is caused by our lack of repentance? Do we see the damage that sin causes in our life and the lives of those around us or have we just become too apathetic? Let's pray together;

Lord, forgive my complacent attitude. Help me stand before you with a bare and a contrite heart. Help me not to just repent in words but also in my actions. Give me tears to weep for the pain I can

bring others and help me to live in the hope of repentance.

Jesus is now at the crucifixion site.

Station #5 Jesus is stripped of his Garments

John 19:23-24

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they divided his clothes among the four of them. They also took his robe, but it was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. So they said, "Rather than tearing it apart, let's throw dice for it." This fulfilled the Scripture that says, "They divided my garments among themselves and threw dice for my clothing." So that is what they did.

It may be at this point in our journey with Jesus that we just can't watch any longer. We just have to turn away. It is when he suffers the greatest humiliation possible.

Remember when he came into the world, angels sang out, *Glory to God in the highest heavens?* As a young child, Wise Men from the east paid homage to him as King with special gifts. People flocked around him by the thousands to hear him teach. Just a few short days ago, people lay coats and palm branches in his pathway as he rode into Jerusalem, singing *Hosanna*.

Now, the worst form of indignity. He stands alone as soldiers strip him naked and gamble for the last things he owns, literally the clothes on his back. Just the night before, he removed his cloak and washed his disciples' feet and called them to follow his example of humility and service. Now he allowed the authorities to publically disgrace and ridicule him. Left with nothing, even stripped of his human decency.

Honestly, my personal inclination is that I would rather walk with Jesus into Jerusalem with the praise and adulation of people ringing in my ears than risk this type of humiliation.

I want to follow Jesus, I really do. But is this what it means? To be willing to lay aside everything? Let's pray together;

Jesus, forgive me for preferring the path of glory and accolades. Forgive me for the selfishness that wants to serve you when it is easy and people are praising me. Teach me to have a humble spirit that

replaces self centredness and may I be vulnerable to follow your example. Give me the courage to minister to others as you have shown us.

Station #6 Jesus is Nailed to the Cross

Mark 15:23-32

They offered him wine drugged with myrrh, but he refused it. Then the soldiers nailed him to the cross. They divided his clothes and threw dice to decide who would get each piece. It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. A sign announced the charge against him. It read, "The King of the Jews."

Two revolutionaries were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left.

The people passing by shouted abuse, shaking their heads in mockery. "Ha! Look at you now!" they yelled at him. "You said you were going to destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days. Well then, save yourself and come down from the cross!"

The leading priests and teachers of religious law also mocked Jesus. "He saved others," they scoffed, "but he can't save himself! Let this Messiah, this King of Israel, come down from the cross so we can see it and believe him!" Even the men who were crucified with Jesus ridiculed him.

It is hard to hear the sharp crack of the hammer against the nail and not shudder. So this is it, is it? Jesus spoke of being the light of the world and now it all ends in darkness? The gathered crowds mock Jesus right up until the end. It is difficult to suppress the urge to lash out in rage of the injustice of it all. The cruelty of the Roman soldiers. The hypocrisy of the Jewish High Priests and religious leaders. The deceitfulness of Judas. The fickleness of the people. How could they?!

Jesus spoke of loving each other, bearing each other's burdens even loving your enemies and now was it all for nothing? But, is the blood only on the hands of only those who drove the nails into Jesus' hands and feet?

You know how that familiar song goes, *were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

I have always felt like I could deny it, *no I wasn't there*. It was the Roman soldiers. It was the Jewish leaders. It was the mob mentality of the people. But, I was there and so, were you. Jesus died because of our sin. We helped drive the nails in his hands. Let's pray together;

Lord, just remind me of the deadly cost of sin. Forgive me for not allowing you to deal with the darkness that I harbor deep within my heart. Forgive me for fooling myself into believing that it is no big deal. Lord, transform me into what I can be by your grace.

Station #7 Jesus Cares for His Mother.

John 19:25-27

Standing near the cross were Jesus' mother, and his mother's sister, Mary (the wife of Clopas), and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother standing there beside the disciple he loved, he said to her, "Dear woman, here is your son." And he said to this disciple, "Here is your mother." And from then on this disciple took her into his home.

Although I am not a mother, I know the heart of a mother well. Even though I have lived away from her for 37 years, I still get the weekly questions of concern for my health and wellbeing from my 80 year-old mother.

Even though none of our children live in our home any more, my wife still has daily interactions via phone, text or face time with her beloved children. I have had the privilege over the past 5 months to watch my oldest daughter embrace the joy and at times, the heartache of mothering her little son, Beau.

But no matter how hard I try, I cannot fathom what it must have been like for Mary, the mother of Jesus. What was going through her mind as he walked the Via Dolorosa and then hung on that cross? Is she thinking back to when the angel came to her announcing that she would give birth to this special son? Or the time when Jesus was 12 years old and went missing only to have Mary and Joseph find him in the temple listening intently to the Religious leaders?

Can this be what God intended for Jesus' life? Why was John standing beside Mary when all the other

disciples had fled for their lives in Jesus last moments? Jesus asks a great deal from John in this passage. Jesus doesn't just ask that he would drop in for a visit to his mother once in a while, when he is gone. No, he asks that from this moment on, John would treat Mary as a mother. But that is what he expected of all of his followers. That we would treat each other like family. Let's pray together;

Dear Lord, give me the courage to stand beside those who are hurting and share their pain. Through your strength and by your grace, make me a conduit of your love, not just to the lovable, but to any who need to feel cared for and loved.

Station #8 Jesus Dies on the Cross

Mark 15:37-39

Then Jesus uttered another loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

When the Roman officer who stood facing him saw how he had died, he exclaimed, "This man truly was the Son of God!"

Jesus cried out in pain and desolation. It gives us a glimpse into the humanity of God. Yet it is a cry and a prayer from human lips to a God who hears the cries of his children. Do you ever doubt that God hears your cries?

Then it is over. Jesus is dead. The earth shakes, the curtain in the temple is torn. It is such a riveting moment that now even a Roman Soldier thinks Jesus is the son of God.

God never stops hearing our cries. Jesus never stopped loving us. I wish I could say the same thing back to him, but I can't because sometimes my love for him can be conditional. There are times when I wish that I would demonstrate my love to him more. Do you ever feel like that?

Jesus died for a purpose. He died for a cause and we are the cause! Jesus died for the sins of humanity. He died for you and for me but sin does not get the final word. God can redeem even the very worst that human beings, that we, can throw his way.

What can God do with what seems like such a final ending. We hope and then.... we wait. Let's pray together;

Heavenly Father, we cannot comprehend how deep and how wide your love is for us. Let this dark time become the fertile soil for your love to grow in us and in this faith community. Teach us how to love each other the way that you love us. We long for life to spring out of death. Out of the darkness bring us the light of a new day. Have mercy on us, Lord we pray. Amen.

Our pilgrimage along the Via Dolorosa has come to an end. What started at the judgement seat of Pilate has ended at the cross. We have made several stops along the way and pondered what this journey must have felt like for Jesus and we have contemplated what it means to us.

As we head into Passion Week this year, 2019, we hope for the dawning of a new day. Easter Sunday is coming. We pray for God to bring life out of death but for now we focus on our journey to the cross and we focus on the sacrifice of Jesus for all of humanity.

Amen

Points to Ponder

The Gift 2.0 ~ Jesus as Sacrifice

The Stations of the Cross

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Have you ever been on a pilgrimage? Describe your experience with your group and why it was so meaningful for you.
2. Share any of the content from the message this past weekend that stood out for you particularly.
3. Discuss the “Stations of the Cross” along the Via Dolorosa. Read the passage listed beside each Station. What impacted you about each Station and what does it mean to your journey of faith?

Station #1 Pilate condemns Jesus to Die.
Matthew 27:11-14, 24, 26

Station #2 Jesus accepts the Cross
Matthew 27:27-31

Station #3 Simon helps carry the Cross
Mark 15:21

Station #4 Jesus speaks to the Women
Luke 23:27-31

Station #5 Jesus is stripped of his Garments
John 19:23-24

Station #6 Jesus is nailed to the Cross
Mark 15:23-32

Station #7 Jesus cares for his Mother
John 19:25-27

Station #8 Jesus dies on the Cross
Mark 15:37-39

4. What is the significance of entering into the journey with Jesus along the Via Dolorosa? What does it mean to you that Jesus became our sacrifice?

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray that the journey to Easter this week would be deeply meaningful to you. Pray that you don't jump too quickly to Easter Sunday but that you take time to ponder the sacrifice Jesus made for humanity that is represented by Good Friday.