

Midweek 5

It Is Hidden in the Savior's Stumbling

Text: Mark 15:17-21

- I. See—he stumbled under the crushing weight of the cross.
 - A. He could have used his almighty power to carry the cross with no more trouble than it would be to carry a twig.
 - B. How, then, would he show the depth of our need and the greatness of his love? Therein lies his glory!
- II. We will too.
 - A. While he could have prevented his stumbling, we cannot altogether prevent ours.
 - B. We stumble because of our inborn weakness, and we stumble because of our own pandering to that weakness.
- III. We need his help beneath the weight of the cross.
 - A. He stumbled—he knows the weight of your cross.
 - B. He stumbled—he is at your side in his Word and sacraments to wash off the dirt of the street and to lift you up again as you continue the journey under the cross to the empty tomb. The rein lies our glory!

This evening we are nearing the end of our journey up to the cross and under the cross. The journey to this point has been deadly serious, and it is this evening too. For following him at a distance, it is now becoming quite clear that God is not going to do anything to prevent the completion of this dread drama. Jesus' glory has been hidden in rejection by his own. His glory has been hidden by the rejection of the world. There will be no legion of angels coming to the rescue. There will be no uprising in his behalf by the hundreds and the thousands that Jesus has helped or fed or healed. No, the holiness of the church will not intervene to save him. No, the Roman sense of justice will not kick in either to prevent this horrible miscarriage of justice. For look what happens on the journey this evening. Gasp in horror as you behold it. See how deeply hidden is the glory of the Son of God and the Savior of the world under the cross. Let St. Mark paint the picture for you. He tells us in the 15th chapter, beginning at the 17th verse:

They [that is, Pilate's soldiers] put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.

I.

Is it not an astonishing thing? It is just as Jesus said it would be. The soldiers mock him. Again he is spit upon. Again he is beaten up, after having been scourged. To make sure that his humiliation is complete, these hired hands of the Roman governor, himself a hired hand, bow down in mock homage to the Creator of the world and the preserver of the universe. The angels, who love him perfectly and have worshiped him since their creation, do not intervene. The Father himself, who has declared this to be the Son whom he loves and in whom he is well pleased, does not send thunder bolts to destroy these tormentors of his Son. His glory is completely hidden under bruises and blood, under spitting and shame and abuse of every kind.

And now that his humiliation is just about as low as it can get, they take him out to crucify him. But not even that part of the journey can be uneventful. Jesus has had no sleep and probably nothing at all to eat or drink since the Passover meal the night before. The scourging has left him seriously dehydrated. Under the blood of his wounds there is nothing but black and blue from the beatings. And now they tie onto his arms and shoulder the wooden cross beam for him to carry to the place of execution. But he cannot do it. The Creator of the universe stumbles in exhaustion. The one who carved out the mountains and fashioned the depths of the seas by his word falls under the weight of the cross.

Again we gasp in horror. There is no one to help. The angels do not help. The Father has already begun to abandon Jesus. But what about all those he has helped? Is no one there to jump forward and say, "Here, please, let me carry it for him!" Where are the lepers he cleansed? Where are the blind and the deaf to whom he gave sight and hearing? Where is the young man of Nain whom he raised from the dead? Where is Jairus, whose daughter he had raised? Is there not even one from among the thousands he fed with a few loaves and fishes who will at least show some compassion at this point and come forward to help? Where are the disciples? Where are his relatives? Is there no one at this moment who will help? No. There is not one. And most astonishing of all is this: Jesus does not help himself! He was in these moments still the almighty Son of God. He could have used the power that he still possessed and never gave up to make the load lighter. If he had wanted to, he could have carried that cross with no more effort than it would take to carry a twig.

But look at him there on the way of sorrows. No one helps him. And he does nothing to help himself to make his burden lighter and his pain easier to bear. Since someone is drafted to carry the cross for him, he must have stumbled under the weight of the cross and fallen down. The soldiers may kick and prod and beat him as much as they like, but he will continue to stumble and fall down. So the soldiers, not wanting this filthy business to occupy them any longer than necessary, grab someone from the crowd. Simon from the coast of Cyrene is passing through. He apparently knows nothing of what is going on or the reason for it. And he seems to care nothing at all about the one suffering and stumbling and falling. The soldiers seize him. Out of no regard for Simon and still less regard for Jesus, they put the cross beam on Simon's shoulder to speed up the parade on the way to the execution.

This is worth emphasizing: There is nothing to suggest that the soldiers grab hold of Simon out of any pity for Jesus; they had already shown their contempt for him just before this sorry procession began. They just want to get the job done, and the sooner the better. Nor does anything suggest that Simon saw himself as a helper of Jesus in this sad spectacle. He was drafted. And even then, the help he gave is help that hastened the journey to the place of execution—hardly what we would call help.

We can barely grasp how people could be so cruel, so heartless. We cannot get our minds around it that not one of those Jesus helped or healed, not one of those who said they loved him, did anything at all on this way of sorrows to help him. But what may leave us most puzzled of all is why he did not do something to help himself. Would it have been such a crime to quietly use the divine power that he still had to stand up straight and tall and then to march with triumphant mien to the altar of the cross? Would it have been so terrible to spite the devil and all those who hated Jesus with at least some show of dignity on his way to death? After all, he had shown a glimmer of glory in Gethsemane when they came to arrest him; he had made them all fall backward to the ground when he told them who he was. Additionally, he had performed the miracle of healing Malchus, whose ear Peter had chopped off. Yes, he had even ordered the soldiers to let his disciples go, and they had obeyed his command. Would it now be so terrible just to let another glimpse of that glory shine through, instead of this disgusting scene of humiliation?

But no. No one helps him in his torment, and he does not want anyone to help him. He does not even help himself, not in the slightest. That's how much he loves us. That's his glory. It is not a glory to be seen and wondered at. It is a glory that uses every moment to show his love for us. He wants us to see and know that the price he pays for our salvation is full price, not bargain-basement, knock-off cheap. The suffering decreed for the sinner already in the Garden of Eden was real. The suffering, therefore, of the one who stands now in the place of sinners must be real too. And so he stumbles under the crushing weight of the cross. He falls down on the pavement and stains it with his blood. Note it well: he did not stumble morally by cursing his tormentors in the court of the high priest and then in the courts of Pilate and Herod. He did not stumble spiritually by hurling lightning bolts of terror and torment at those who beat and scourged and spit on him. No, it is just as Isaiah had prophesied: He goes as a quiet lamb to the slaughter. But he does not go as an unfeeling superman. He does not go as a senseless brute. He stumbles. He falls. He lets us see his glory in the suffering that pays for our redemption.

II.

For he knows that we will too will stumble. We too will fall. He wants the sight of his stumbling and falling to be a consolation to us. He wants the sight of it to encourage us with the thought that he understands and knows our pain at such times. The epistle to the Hebrews puts it so well: "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness" (Heb 4:15; 5:2).

For like Jesus, we had the power to avoid stumbling and falling. We noted it already in Gethsemane. If we had just watched with him, filled our eyes with him and our minds

and hearts with his Word, if we had just prayed for his help and gracious presence in the hour of trial, we would not have stumbled. We would not have fallen. Unlike Jesus' stumbling, our stumbling and falling is moral, is spiritual. And also unlike Jesus, we should have used the help that he gives to prevent such stumbling and falling. But we haven't done that. Instead we pander to our own weakness. We think that we can play with the devil. Just a little greed. Just a little getting even. Just a little gossip, a little lie, a little here, a little there. I'll think about something unclean, just for a little while. I'll toy with a grudge, nurse and feed it, just for a little while. It feels so good to look down on this one and to despise that one just for a little while. How nice it is just for a moment not to serve, not to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, not to love and obey him but to love and obey—ME.

III.

And so, through our own fault, we stumble. We fall. The soldier of conscience may be near at hand to kick us while we are down. Others may cry out: "Look at the hypocrite! He's no better than we are. His Christianity is all playacting; when it's convenient, he puts on the show, and when it's not, he turns it off." Oh, how blessed we are when conscience kicks us while we are down. How blessed we are when others shame us because we have stumbled and fallen into hypocrisy. For down on the street, kicked and prodded by conscience, ridiculed and shamed by those who should have expected better from us, we may at last see Jesus. To bear the punishment of the stumbling that is our own fault, he stumbled. To endure the eternal shame that we deserve because we loved to fall, he fell. Thinking of you and yearning for your salvation, he let himself be kicked. And he did it so that he could meet you there in the street of your shame and in the gutter of your guilt. And from his stumbling and falling, you would know that he understands yours and loves you in spite of it. Yes, he loves you and raises you up again to begin your journey under the cross all over again. With the water of your baptism, he washes you from the filth and the grime of your fall, though no one washed him from the filth and the grime of his. With the wine of his blood, he refreshes your parched soul, though no one offered him so much as a drink of water when he was thirsty. He feeds you with the bread of his body to renew your strength, though no one gave him even a crust of bread to quiet his hunger.

Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry the cross for Jesus when he stumbled and fell. But Jesus willingly, eagerly comes to your side to pick you up and carry you when you stumble and fall, even though your stumbling is your own fault. Is that not an amazing thing? Yes. And is it not reason to love him all the more as you follow after him in Lent? Fill your mind with the vision of this glory hidden for you in his stumbling. Let your heart and soul be filled with the grace and mercy that has always been there for you when you fell. And then, maybe, just maybe, you will not stumble so often and fall so far.

And then, maybe, just maybe, you will even join those who, like you, have stumbled and fallen. You will join them not in their sin but with Jesus in helping to raise them up. You will seek your glory in loving service to those who, like you, have stumbled and fallen. You will join them, the members of your family, your friends, those with whom you have contact. You will join them to do what Jesus wants to do—not scold and lord it over them, not ridicule and abuse and kick them when they are down, not constantly remind them of everything they have ever done that was foolish and wrong. No, like Jesus you

will join them in love to raise them up. You will join them in forgiveness. You will join them to help them bear the cross as Jesus has so often and so generously raised you up. For we are on the way to Golgatha. We are on the way to the triumphant cry of "It is finished!" We are on the way to the victory of the empty tomb and the shout that sounds down from the street through the ages, the cry of "He is risen!" Oh, may the victory procession be filled with those who stumbled and fell; may it be filled with those who were raised up and washed and renewed by Jesus, who stumbled and fell; may it be filled with those whose sorrows we have shared, whose guilt we have forgiven, and whose crosses we have helped to carry out of love for Jesus, who carried his for us and for our salvation. Amen.