The Fourth Wednesday in Lent
March 8, 1972
Rolling Meadows, Illinois 60008

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IN NOMINE JESU

St. Mark 15: 21: AND THEY COMPELLED A PASSER-BY, SIMON OF CYRENE, WHO WAS COMING IN FROM THE COUNTRY, THE FATHER OF ALEXANDER AND RUFUS, TO CARRY HIS CROSS.

I wish I DID NOT have to PREACH tonight's sermon. And, I suppose, before the NIGHT is OVER, many of you will WISH that YOU did not have to LISTEN to it. It has to do with CROSS-BEARING - with SUFFERING. And, for the LIFE of us, we CANNOT UNDERSTAND how SUFFERING has a part in the scheme of the ABUNDANT LIFE! The way of the CROSS, we assume, leads NOT to LIFE but to DEATH.

Just let me give you a couple of RECENT EXAMPLES of how our GUARD goes up and we inwardly REVOLT against the inacceptability of SUFFERING and CROSS-BEARING. A TINY, NEWBORN, INFANT SON DIES - - a MOTHER of 42 with 4 CHILDREN, the youngest of which is 6 years old, DIES of CANCER - - a 9 year old GIRL, after OPEN HEART SURGERY hangs between LIFE and DEATH for some 6 weeks now, ~~her PARENTS at the point of COMPLETE DISTRAUGHT and FATIGUE and DISMAY~~ - - a FATHER of some 7 years old DIES of CANCER. Now YOU tell ME that ANY of these things are EASY to take. Sure - we can QUOTE numerous Bible passages - Bible passages that will NOT let us FORGET that God's MINISTRY is a MINISTRY of TEARS. "WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE CHASTENS." - - - "WE MUST THROUGH MUCH TRIBULATION ENTER INTO THE KINGDOM OF GOD." The MARCHING ORDER of our LORD is: "TAKE UP YOUR CROSS AND FOLLOW ME."

Now we can GIVE our MENTAL CONSENT to all of this - - but our HEARTS are still NOT in it. We rather FEEL for the PERSECUTED JEW in the play, "THE FIDDLER ON THE ROOF" who prays, "God, we know we are YOUR PEOPLE and that we must therefore SUFFER, but couldn't You CHOOSE somebody ELSE once in a while."

God HELP us - - we DON'T LIKE CROSSES, and we DON'T like SUFFERING. There has been only ONE PERSON in the HISTORY of MANKIND Who understood the RELATIONSHIP between the CROSS and the CROWN of LIFE. We may FORGET Bible passages - but we cannot FORGET HIM! The ABUNDANT LIFE for HIM was the WAY of the CROSS - and there never will be ANOTHER WAY.

Our text tonight INTRODUCES us to a FIRST in a LONG PROCESSION of CHRIST'S FOLLOWERS, who walked in His STEPS carrying a CROSS. Simon of Cyrene has been the SYMBOL of CROSS-BEARING for CHRISTIANS down through the AGES.

He was NO HERO. He did NOT volunteer to CARRY the CROSS. He was COMPELLED! He was on a VACATION. He had come all the way from the SHORES of NORTHERN AFRICA to see JERUSALEM in the FESTIVE PASSOVER SEASON. His SPIRIT was GAY as HE walked toward the CITY - - which God's PEOPLE regarded as "THE JOY OF THE WHOLE EARTH!" But near the GATE he saw something that suddenly took away ALL the GLADNESS in his HEART. He was brought to a HALT by a PROCESSION that FILLED his heart with HORROR. Women were WEEPING - men were CURSING and SHOUTING INSULTS! Three men, each carrying his OWN CROSS were being LED out to the place of CRUCIFIXION. The procession STOPPED and the CRIES grew LOUDER - when 1 of them SANK to His KNEES beneath the WEIGHT. Simon STOOD WATCHING - - when suddenly he was SIEZED by a ROMAN SOLDIER and COMMANDED to CARRY the FALLEN MAN'S CROSS!..... Did he PROTEST? Of course he did. But it did NOT do him any good.

Simon of Cyrene had NO WAY of knowing that he was being CALLED UPON to be a part in God's GREAT DRAMA of SALVATION - - or that for this his NAME would be inscribed FOREVER on the PAGES of HOLY SCRIPTURE. He did not KNOW who JESUS was. He had NEVER seen Him before. He had NEVER HEARD His parables. He had NEVER SEEN HIM PERFORM a MIRACLE .....BUT NOW - because of HIM - his HOLIDAY had come to

an END - and his VACATION was RUINED. The CROSS was placed upon his shoulders - and he was FORCED to WALK a WAY he did not want to GO.

It was a REAL CROSS that SIMON CARRIED - NOT a JEWELED CROSS worn by PASTORS over their CLERICAL ROBES, or by FINE LADIES around their NECKS. It was a CROSS of COARSE and HEAVY TIMBER that DUG into the FLESH. And the THOUGHTS in his HEART as he carried THAT cross must have been as SHARP and as BITTER as the INSULTS flung at CHRIST by His ENEMIES. ..... Simon of Cyrene was a BYSTANDER. But what went on INSIDE of him - when he was COMPELLED to CARRY the CROSS must have been tramatic. I picture him as REBELLING just as much as YOU and I DO, when we are COMPELLED TO CARRY a CROSS.

Some day, Simon would KNOW that the HAND of God CARRIED him ALL the way to JERUSALEM - - - not for the VACATION he had PLANNED, but for THIS MOMENT of COMPANIONSHIP with his LORD. Some day he would PRIASE this LORD who led him to the WAY of SORROWS and SUFFERING to walk quietly and ALONE with his SAVIOR.

God STILL does this FOR US when we SEEK the ABUNDANT LIFE in the ABUNDANCE of things or in the FLEETING PLEASURES of this world - - He REACHES DOWN from heaven to turn our FEET into the way of the CROSS - - a ROAD of SORROW, SUFFERING, SICKNESS, or DEATH - - - a ROAD that must be WALKED with a BOWED HEAD - - - but finally a road which COMPELS us to SEE NO ONE EXCEPT JESUS ONLY. Some times He shatters our HOPES and DREAMS so that we might put our HOPE in HIM. He BLINDS our EYES with TEARS so that we may see Him more CLEARLY. He crushes our HEART so that we may find PEACE only in Him. He lets us DIE so that we may LIVE with Him.

The SUPREME TASK of our FAITH is to BELIEVE in the unfailing LOVE of GOD demonstrated

by our LORD'S CROSS - - and therefore, by OUR CROSSES TOO. The PURPOSE of the CROSS - HIS and OURS - - - is that WE might have LIFE, BLESSED FELLOWSHIP with GOD and with HIS SON. For this God has a MINISTRY of TEARS - - and we have a MINISTRY of CONSOLATION. But the important thing ALWAYS IS the realization that ALL things must NOW work together for OUR GOOD - - because we ARE GOD'S CHILDREN through the CROSS of CHRIST. The CROSS is ALWAYS the INSTRUMENT thru which God brings us NEARER to Him. And it is THAT nearness that matters - NOW and ETERNALLY. The HEAVEN we SEEK is described best by the PSALMIST who says, "IN THY PRESENCE IS FULLNESS OF JOY: AT THY RIGHT HAND THERE ARE PLEASURES FOR EVER MORE."

.....Like Simon of Cyrene, we may NOT ALWAYS KNOW WHY - - - but of this we can be SURE: THAT THAT CROSS IS BLESSED INDEED THAT LEADS US TO HIM! Amen.