

Blessing

Leader: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the father, and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

People: And also with you.

Scripture (Psalm 118:19-29)

Leader: Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

People: This is the LORD's gate; the righteous shall enter through it.

Leader: I will give thanks because you have answered me. You have become my salvation.

People: The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

Leader: This has come from the LORD.

People: It is marvelous in our eyes.

Leader: This is the day on which the Lord has acted.

People: Let us shout with joy and rejoice in it.

Leader: Please, save us, O LORD! Please!

People: O LORD, please bring success!

Leader: Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.

People: We bless you from the house of the LORD.

Leader: The LORD is God

People: He has given us light. With cords bind the festival sacrifice to the horns of the altar.

Leader: You are my God, and I will give thanks to you.

People: You are my God, I will extol you.

Leader: O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good.

People: For his steadfast love endures forever.

Prayer

Leader: O Lord, we are gathered together here this day as your people, as those who have been called out of darkness into your marvelous light. We are here only because you have loved us and been faithful across the generations that we might be your people. And yet we quickly confess that we are not worthy of that love.

As we contemplate the Cross and what it means, we are filled with joy and wonder at the sacrifice that Jesus has made to show us light in the darkness and offer us life in the midst of death. We confess that we have nothing to offer in return for that sacrifice, nothing that will match such love. We know that only love can respond to such a gift. Yet we know that we are not always loving or lovable. But you remain steadfastly faithful to us. You love us even when we are not lovable, and remain steadfast in your grace that calls us to follow the example of Jesus who is the Christ.

We are committed to that journey, to be followers of the One who has given so much that we might be sons and daughters of God. But sometimes the journey that we take in following Jesus who is the Christ is not all light and joy. Sometimes the Way is rough and dimly lit. Sometimes the darkness of life threatens to engulf the light.

And so we cry out to you, O Lord. Forgive us for our sometimes faltering steps. Show us more clearly the Way. Shine anew the light of your presence into our lives so strongly that a new love for You will be kindled. Light within us a love beyond emotion and sentimentality, a love that is willing to lay aside all privilege and self-centeredness. Grow within us a love that is willing to surrender all our fears and uncertainties to you, that desires nothing more than to love God with all our being and to love those around us with the same faithfulness with which you love us.

Now, as we begin this journey of the Cross, we open our hearts and minds to you. We lay aside for these moments the trivialities of our life and bring ourselves into your presence. Speak to us what we need to hear. And help us to hear, not just the words that are spoken, but your Word spoken afresh in our hearts.

People: Speak, for your servants are listening.

[A short time of silent prayer and meditation]

Leader: Let us begin our journey.

The Stations of the Cross

Station 1: Pilate Condemns Jesus to Die

Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so." But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?" But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed. . . . So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." . . . and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. (Matt 27:11-14, 24, 26b)

Speaker: Jesus, I wish you would speak! I wish you would proclaim who you are. I wish you would confront the disbelief of the crowds and the arrogant cowardice of the powers that be. Surely someone will speak up for you! Where are the lepers who were healed? Where are the blind who can now see? Where are all the people who ate the bread and fish on the hillside? Where are those who followed you so easily when they thought you would become King of the Jews? Yet no one speaks. No voice in the crowd comes to your defense. You stand alone.

You stand before Pilate, the power of Rome. Weakness stands before strength. And yet, Pilate, the ruthless enforcer for the Empire is not really in control here. He cannot make you confess. He cannot quiet the crowds. For all his power, he cannot find the courage to do what is right. So he does what is safe. He yields to the crowds for the sake of order. Courage and strength do not always sit on thrones or judgment seats. Power is not always in the hands of Empires.

I have been alone. I have been falsely accused, and no one has spoken for me. I have been treated unfairly by those who could have used their power for better purposes. I can understand some of your feelings as you stand silently before Pilate and watch him proclaim his own innocence as he condemns an innocent man.

But perhaps I have treated others unfairly as well. Perhaps I have not spoken up for others when they needed a voice. There are those around me who have been treated unjustly. Have I always had the courage to come to their defense? There are those around me who feel alone and abandoned. Have I always been there for them? O Lord, forgive me for not always being who I should be.

I find it easy to condemn the moral cowardice of Pilate. Have I ever given in to pressure from others to take the easy path rather than the right path? Have I ever chosen the easy path over the right path?

Leader: Jesus, I see in your silence the quiet strength that reveals a peace and a resolve. O Lord, help me deal with the unfairness of life without becoming critical of others. Help me to be sensitive to the pain and feelings of others. Give me the courage to do what is right without being swayed by the demands of others.

People: O Lord, hear our prayers.

Station 2: Jesus Accepts His Cross

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. (Matthew 27:27-31)

Carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. (John 19:17)

Speaker: Jesus, I cringe at the pain of the thorns. But I am wounded far more deeply at the humiliation and degradation you suffer, that the very thing you came to offer us as a gift becomes a source of ridicule. The crowds thought of a King in terms of power. But you came to be the kind of King who shepherds his people, who takes responsibility for their well-being, whose principles are faithfulness, justice, and righteousness (Isa 11:3-4). And yet, the people are not ready for that kind of King.

I would like to think that I am ready to follow you who offer a Kingdom of peace and love for one another. But am I? Am I willing to yield my ideas of what the Kingdom should look like for the role of a servant? Am I really so willing to give up my human preoccupation with power and control and accept a different kind of crown than I was expecting?

I see you accept the Cross in the midst of such mockery. You could have refused. What more could they have done to you? Yet you begin this journey knowing full well where it will lead. I hear no words of complaint, no protestations of innocence, no cursing the injustice. And yet I am so prone to complain and whine about the most trivial things. Sometimes the things I face in my life are more than trivial. Sometimes the troubles of life bear down on me. But I so easily fall into self-pity. I too often assume that I am the only one who bears a cross, or that my cross is larger and heavier than any others.

But I am not alone in that. People all around me bear far more than I must bear. You accepted your cross without self-pity. Can I follow your example?

Leader: O Lord, forgive me for forgetting that in my weakness I am driven to trust on you, and that in such trust my weakness becomes your strength. Forgive my attitudes of self-pity that make me more repulsive than loving. I do not ask for crosses to bear. But when they come, give me the strength to bear them as one who follows your example.

People: O Lord, be merciful to us.

Station 3: Station 3: Jesus falls for the first time

Leader: Jesus begins his painful journey to Calvary. The brutal treatment of the soldiers, the bloody scourging, the crown of thorns, the burden of the cross, all this exhausts his strength and Jesus falls to the earth on his face.

People: O Jesus, by the merits of this painful fall, deliver us from the misfortune of falling into sin. By thy courage in rising, strengthen me to rise from the abyss of sin and never permit me to be separated from thee.

All: O Lord, be merciful to us.

Station 4: Jesus meets his Mother

Leader: At the sight of Jesus dragged along by a troop of ruffians, the maternal heart of Mary is pierced with a thousand swords, and is torn with all anguish.

People: O Lord obtain for us that ardent love with which thou accompanied Jesus to Calvary and that constancy which thou displayed on the cross. Grant that we may remain there faithfully with thee until our last breath.

All: O Lord, be merciful to us.

Station 5: Simon Helps Carry the Cross

They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. (Mark 15:21)

Jesus, I can only imagine the awful weight of that cross you carry. It is not just the weight of beams of wood that presses down on you. It is also the weight of the burden you carry for those whom you have loved. You came to offer them life, and yet they return only death.

So I see you fall from the crushing weight of pain and grief. I don't know how many times you have fallen. But I know that your physical strength is failing. The soldiers must recognize this as well, because they force a man from the crowd to help you carry the cross the rest of the way to the place where you will be crucified. Perhaps they are afraid that you will die before you make it to the top of the hill. The man of Cyrene was just a bystander passing through on his way into town from the countryside. And yet he bears the weight of the cross to save your strength.

I would like to think that if I had been there I would have rushed from the crowd and volunteered to carry that cross for you. But would I have had the courage to face the Roman soldiers and risk being forced to join you on a cross? Would I have really been so eager to share your cross if it meant that I might have to die on one as well? Would I have been willing to risk everything to ease your suffering for a few moments by letting you know that you were not alone?

Besides, I have my own crosses already. I have as much as I can bear without taking on the added burdens of others. And what would people think of me if I were seen consorting with criminals and enemies of Rome in such a public spectacle? So instead of offering to help, I tried to become invisible in the crowd. And when the soldiers were looking around for someone to press into service, I looked away and pretended not to notice what was happening.

It is easy to pretend not to see the needs, the grief, and the suffering around me every day. It is easy to pretend not to hear the cries for help that come in many forms from those among whom I walk every day. It is easy to convince myself that I am too busy, or too tired, or have too much on my plate already to get involved in the lives of others. There are simply too many who need too much.

And yet, I remember something that you said, something about taking up my own cross and following you. You said something about becoming a servant of all, of putting myself last and others first.

Is this what it means to be a servant? Jesus, are you showing me what it means to be that kind of servant. Is this man from Cyrene modeling for me the path of discipleship?

Must Jesus bear the cross alone
And all the world go free?
No, there's a cross for everyone
And there's a cross for me.

Leader: O Lord, forgive me for becoming so preoccupied with myself that I have become deaf and blind to the grief and suffering of those around me. Forgive me for my indifference. Constantly remind me that I cannot love you without loving others as well. Help me always remember that to be a follower of yours means that I share in the burdens of others. Lord, show me someone whose cross I may help carry.

People: O Lord, hear our prayers.

Station 6: Veronica wipes the Face of Jesus (skipped in protestant version)

Station 7: Jesus falls the second time (skipped in protestant version)

Leader: It was our weaknesses that he carried, our sufferings that he endured, while we thought of him as stricken, as one struck by God and afflicted. But he was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins; upon him was the punishment that makes us whole, by his stripes we were healed. We had all gone astray like sheep, each following his own way; but the Lord laid upon him the guilt of us all. (Isaiah 53:4-6)

Though he was harshly treated, / he submitted and opened not his mouth; / like a lamb led to the slaughter or a sheep before the shearers, / he was silent and uttered no cry. / When he was cut off from the land of the living, and smitten for the sin of his people, / a grave was assigned him among the wicked and a burial place with evildoers, / though he had done no wrong nor spoken any falsehood.

Leader: avoid the occasions of sin, so that I may perseverance in my good purpose.

People: O Lord, hear our prayers.

Station 8: Jesus Speaks to the Women

A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (Luke 23:27-31)

Jesus, as you struggle along the road toward that awful place of death, you see a group of women among the crowd following you, already grieving at your impending death. You have heard this wailing many times before at funerals and tragic events. But now, they mourn for you.

You have always shown equal compassion to women you have encountered across the years. You have always seemed to understand the unique burdens that women bear in a world and a culture that pushes them to the margins of society. So here, as you bear the most unimaginable pain of body and heart, you stop to speak to them. You are about to die, and yet you are more concerned with others than with your own suffering and death.

But your words are strange and seem out of place on this road of sorrow. They have a prophetic ring to them as if you were still trying to tell people something important that they cannot quite grasp, or that perhaps they do not really want to hear. You speak of even darker days, of far worse things to come upon the people. Yet, how can things get worse?

I do remember that you often spoke of repentance, calling the people to turn from their wicked ways and accept the coming of the Kingdom of God. Many times, you criticized the religious leaders and those who thought themselves righteous, warning that they would bring destruction upon the people and the land. I remember that once you even spoke of the destruction of the temple. But no one really believes that is going to happen. God has always been with us, and surely, he will not let such a terrible thing happen to his people.

And yet, no one thought the exile would happen. And here you are on the path of sorrow stumbling toward your death. No one thought that would happen either. Maybe you understand more than we have realized. Maybe you see something that we have refused to believe.

Maybe we are not as righteous as we have thought. Maybe we have rejected repentance, not because we did not need it but because we needed it more than we dared admit.

Is that what you mean by these strange words? Is it possible that your death is only the beginning of things for which to weep? Is it possible that our refusal to repent and change the way we live is causing these beginnings of sorrow? Is our own sin and our refusal to confess it really the reason you are on this path?

I would like to think that I have repented, that I have confessed my sins and stand righteous before God. I would rather play the part of the righteous follower. I would rather weep for you, Jesus. I do not want to weep for myself and the pain I bring to others because of my failures and sin. Yet, how long has it been since I have shed tears for my own failures, for my own sins? Have I really been honest enough with God about who I am?

Leader: O Lord, forgive my unwillingness to repent, to confess all that I am before you. Help me go beyond the repentance mouthed in words of false piety, to sweep away all the facades of who I try so hard to be before others, and recall who I really am inside. Help me once again stand before God with a bare and open heart. Help me not just to repent in words, but to put that repentance into action in everything I am and do. O Lord, give me the gift of tears to weep for my own failures, for my sins, for the pain I bring to others, and to live the fruits of repentance.

People: O Lord, be merciful to us.

Station 9: Jesus falls for the third time

Leader: I lie prostrate in the dust; give me life according to your word. I declared my ways, and you answered me; teach me your commands. Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous deeds. My soul weeps for sorrow; strengthen me with your words.
(Psalms 118:25-28)

The Lord is my light and my salvation; / whom should I fear? / The Lord is my life's refuge; / of whom should I be afraid? / When evildoers come at me to devour my flesh, / my foes and my enemies themselves stumble and fall. / Though an army encamp against me, / my heart will not fear; / though war be waged upon me, even then will I trust.
(Psalms 26:1-3)

Leader: O Jesus my strength, save me from losing my mortal soul and thus rendering useless all the suffering and fatigues which thou didst endure to deliver me from eternal death.

People: O Lord, be merciful to us.

Station 10: Jesus Is Stripped of His Garments

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it." This was to fulfill what the scripture says, "They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots." And that is what the soldiers did. (John 19:23-25a)

Jesus, I want to follow you on this journey. But I cannot watch this. I must turn away as you are humiliated.

You came into this world amid celebration and anticipation. Angels sang in the heavens to celebrate your birth. As a child, Magi from the East paid homage to you as to a king. The people followed you by the thousands as you taught on the hillsides of Galilee. They wanted to make you king! Just a few days ago the crowds followed you in the streets of Jerusalem singing praises to God: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! "

Yet now, you are forced to suffer the worst of human indignity. You stand alone as the soldier's strip from you the last thing that you possess, and play games to see who will claim it.

Just yesterday, you removed your cloak and laid it aside to wash your disciples' feet. You called them to follow your example as a symbol of humility and service to others. Now you allow others to strip you of your clothes. You allow them to publicly disgrace and ridicule you. You are left with nothing, not even human decency.

Are you still trying to teach us something about what it means to serve others? Is your surrender to such degradation a model for how we are to live in the world as your followers? I don't like such an idea. I would rather walk with you into Jerusalem with the praise of the people ringing in my ears than to risk such humiliation. I *want* to follow you! But is this really what it means to be a follower, that I must lay aside everything and risk this kind of degradation? And yet, that is exactly what *you* are doing.

Leader: O Lord, forgive me for wanting to take the path of glory and reward. Forgive me for my selfishness that wants to serve you in easy ways and seeks the reward of others' praise. Lord, teach me the humility of spirit that replaces self-centeredness with a sacrificial spirit. Make me vulnerable so that I may follow your example. Help me see those around me who are in need. Give me the courage to lay aside the things that I use to hide from their need, and find ways to minister to others as you have shown us.

People: O Lord, hear our prayers.

Station 11: Jesus Is Nailed to the Cross

And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take. It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also taunted him. (Mark 15:23-32)

Jesus, I do not want to see this. Yet I force myself to watch. I hear the sharp crack of hammer against nail and shudder. It sounds so final. Is it over? Did all those wonderful lessons you taught by the seaside mean anything? You spoke of being a light to the world, but it seems that darkness is winning.

How they mock you! You said that you could rebuild the temple in three days and I thought that anyone who can raise the dead surely could deal with broken stones. But it is not the stones in the temple that matter to you, is it? Your greater concern is how we relate to you and to one another. You so want us to know the power of living love. Is love stronger than this evil that now surrounds you?

I want to rage at the injustice of this. The cruelty of the Romans. The hypocrisy of the High Priest and religious leaders. The cowardice of the disciples. The treachery of Judas. The fickleness of the crowds. Do they not remember that you spoke of loving one another, of bearing the burdens of others, even of loving our enemies? They should know better, they should have listened and learned.

And yet, would I have done differently? Is the guilt just of those who drove the nails and the rest of us are innocent? Or is it human sin that drives the nails? *My sin.* The old American spiritual asks the question, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" I want to deny it. I want to pretend that it is someone else's guilt, someone else's sin. But I *was* there. Jesus, you are here, dying, because of *my sin.* I *was* there. It was I who drove the nails.

Leader: O Lord, remind me of the deathly cost of sin. Forgive me for those things I have done that are displeasing to you. Forgive me for not allowing you to deal with the darkness that I harbor in the hidden recesses of my heart. Forgive me for fooling myself into believing that I am more righteous than I am, that I am better than others, and that I have no need to repent. Forgive me for those things I should have done, but found excuses not to do. O Lord, make me better than I am, transform me into what I can be by your grace.

People: O Lord, forgive us for those things we have done and those things we have left undone. In your grace, be merciful to us.

Station 12: Jesus Dies on the Cross

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (Mark 15:33-39)

It is dark in the middle of the day. It seems that the heavens and the earth are grieving, telling us that something is horribly wrong. And yet some still seem to mock. Or do they really expect some final miracle to save you?

Jesus, I hear you cry out in lament from the Psalms and know that it is the cry of human pain and desolation. Here, where too often we see you only as God, you reveal your true humanity. Most everyone has forsaken you, and in your pain the emotion escapes in a cry of abandonment. Yet, it is a prayer, a cry from human lips to a God who hears such cries.

Finally, it is over. You are dead. What have we done?

The earth shakes. The curtain in the temple is torn right down the middle. The Holy of Holies is exposed for all to see. What does it mean? Who are you? Even the Romans now think that you are the son of God. But you are dead. It's too late. What have I done?

Yet you never stopped loving me even in death. Oh, how I wish I had shown my love for you more while you were here. You died because of human sin, because of me. Yet we know that sin is never the final word. God can redeem the worst that human beings can do. But this? What can come of this? What can God do with such a final ending? We hope, and wait

Leader: O Lord, I cannot comprehend the depth and breadth of your love. There are not enough words in all languages together to describe what your love means to me. May my love for you and my love for all your children in some way reflect your love. Let this dark night become fertile soil for growth in your love and for our growth as a community of Faith. May you use this night to teach us how to love you and to love others the way you have loved us. O Lord, we long for newness, for hope, for renewal, for life where there is now death. Out of this darkness bring to us the light of a new dawn. O Lord, have mercy on us.

People: O Lord, hear our prayers. We hope in you and trust in your mercy.

Station 13: Jesus is taken down from the Cross

When the soldiers came to Jesus, they saw that he was already dead so that they did not break his legs, but one of them opened his side with a lance, and immediately there came out blood and water. Joseph of Arimathea, because he was a disciple of Jesus (although a secret one for fear of the Jews), besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus. And Pilate gave permission.

(John 19:33-34,38)

O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them, / and I will bring you back to your land. / Then you shall know that I am the Lord. / O my people! I will put my spirit in you that you may live. / You shall know then that I am the Lord. / I have promised it, / and I will do it, says the Lord.

(Ezekiel 37:12-14)

Prayer:

Let us pray. Beloved Savior, You returned to the Father all that He had given You, so that He might restore all to You a hundred-fold in the glorious resurrection. Help us, we beg You, to give generously of ourselves in all that we do for You, so that like You we might be made perfect in a new resurrection.

People: O Lord, hear our prayers. We hope in you and trust in your mercy

Station 14: Jesus is laid in the sepulcher

³⁸ Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. ³⁹ He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds.^[e] ⁴⁰ Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. ⁴¹ At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴² Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

People: O Jesus our dear savior, grant that our greatest consolation in this valley of tear may be to meditate on the torments and the ignominious death. Thou didst suffer for my redemption. May the new sepulcher in which thou wert laid be the symbol of my heart renewed and purified from sin, so that dead to my passions here below. I may lead a life hidden in God and merit a happy end in the splendor of thy glory.

All: O Lord, hear our prayers. We hope in you and trust in your mercy.

Offer a Closing Prayer

Congregational Song: *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, V 1-4 Hymnal 298