

The Lenten Meditations 2024

Episode 3: Inconvenience

By Tara Ludwig



*Christ Carrying the Cross (1560) by Titian
Hangs in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, Spain*

Everyone knows by experience the frustration of being inconvenienced. An appointment is canceled at the last minute, the store doesn't have the item we need, a home renovation takes longer than expected. Inconvenience is a part of life, and admittedly, not a fun one. We do not like intrusions into the smooth efficiency of our routine.

So yes inconvenience is, well, inconvenient; it is annoying and exasperating and maddening. But inconvenience is *not* suffering, and it is startling how often we speak as if it is. We may complain about the traffic that delayed our homecoming as if it has caused us egregious harm, forgetting that it was the person in the car accident that shut down the freeway who was *actually* suffering.

In the spiritual life we must know how to distinguish with definite clarity the difference between what is simply an inconvenience, and what is true suffering, so that we can be open to receiving what God seeks to accomplish through both. The scriptures offer us a profound example of this in the story of Simon the Cyrene, which we will explore here in the Gospel of Mark:

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. They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means "the place of the skull"). (Mark 15:20-22)

We don't know exactly why Simon had traveled from Cyrene, a city in modern-day Libya, to Jerusalem, a journey of at least 800 miles. It is probable that he came for the Passover feast, but whatever the reason, in an era without cars, trains, buses, or airplanes, we know that he must have spent a very long time trying to get there. One does not undertake such a long and arduous pilgrimage just for fun, so Simon's presence in Jerusalem must have meant that his business there was something important.

But once Simon has finally arrived in Jerusalem and is wandering innocently through the city, he is singled out among the throngs of people and wrenched from the crowd to carry the (probably very heavy) cross of a condemned man he has never seen before, for hours. This was certainly *not* the plan! His agenda for the entire day was utterly ruined; the epitome of a gross inconvenience.

And yet, something tells me that when Simon went back to his inn that night and settled in to tell his wife about his day, that's not what he said. I don't think he complained to her about the inconvenience of it all, how this bloody, dirty criminal had intruded upon his day and wrecked all his plans, with such blatant discourtesy, and how dare he. No, I don't think that's what Simon would have said at all.

I think Simon would have talked about the look in the condemned man's eyes, how they spoke of something so deep and so beautiful, and how Simon felt those eyes pierce right through to his very heart. He would have talked about the exquisite dignity of the man as he struggled, and all the tears of the people who trailed behind him with such love and sorrow. Simon was inconvenienced that day, yes, but he saw that it was Jesus who *suffered*. And I suspect that, in the end, Simon did not resent the inconvenience of serving a suffering and dying man; in fact, I think he was grateful for the privilege.

The Catholic writer and philosopher G.K. Chesterton once quipped that "An adventure is only an inconvenience rightly considered. An inconvenience is only an adventure wrongly considered." I see Simon the Cyrene as someone with a highly developed capacity for adventure. And because of the adventure he undertook for Christ's sake in Jerusalem, we still

remember and honor him over 2000 years later. He carried the cross of God; which makes whatever “important business” he had originally planned for that day seem pretty trivial in comparison.

My intention is not to sugarcoat the annoyance of life’s inconveniences. They’re annoying! Lord knows that as a mother I am *constantly* inconvenienced by the needs and whims of my three children, and I certainly do not always receive them with patience and grace. But I think we can look to Simon of Cyrene as a model for how to keep our sense of inconvenience and suffering in proportion and in their proper context. An inconvenience is a disruption to our comfort, nothing more. Whereas suffering, as we discussed last week, is the bearing of a pain in which we have placed deliberate meaning and intention. (I would venture to add that mothers do quite a bit of *that*, too.)

So, my invitation to you, as I send you off into the wilds of this third week of Lent, is to consider how you can reframe the minor inconveniences of life as a summons to adventure. Would you even be so bold and radical as to undertake this Lent the adventure of *deliberately* inconveniencing yourself for the sake of another person who is suffering? Afterwards, will you tell the story as one of frustration and inconvenience, or will you, like Simon of Cyrene, tell it as an epic tale of wonder and awe?

I’ll close now with a short quote from writer and theologian Henri Nouwen: “I used to get upset about all the interruptions to my work until one day I realized that the interruptions *were* my real work.”

Thank you for listening to the Lenten Meditations. May the time you spend side by side with the suffering Christ this Lent bring you ever closer to his beautiful heart. Amen.