

“The Way of the Cross”—literally one hell of a trip. Each “way,” a sort of mile marker along Jesus’ hellish journey. Tonight, as we made our way through it, we got to see what it was like to walk in His shoes—

The anguish in the garden, knowing full well what was to come . . .

The knife in your back, courtesy of your own good friend . . .

Your church’s leaders looking to get rid of you for good . . .

One of your most loyal followers denying He ever knew you . . .

Hearing the Roman governor convict innocent you, while letting a murderer go free . . .

The scourging . . . the thorns . . . the mocking . . .

The same people who used to adore you are now shouting for your crucifixion . . .

Carrying your own cross, like digging your own grave . . .

The nails, the shame, the curse of hanging on the tree . . .

Spending your final hours not surrounded by friends and family but stuck between two criminals . . .

Having to say your last goodbyes . . .

Feeling your breathing become more and more labored until finally you

Your body moved without your consent into a cold, dark tomb, never to see the light of day again . . .

How does any of that *not* spell H-E-double hockey sticks?

But what might make the “Way of the Cross” especially arduous to many of us is that we know exactly *why* Jesus goes to hell and back. This was a one-way-ticket meant for us, a permanent vacation from which you and I were never supposed to come back. The wages of sin is death—eternal death.

You and I would be wrong though to think that’s what this day is about. No, as Luther puts it on the front cover of your bulletin—when we focus on Christ’s Passion, it’s not about “what Christ suffered, but [about] *why* he suffered, [the answer being,]‘for my sake.’” In other words, when we meditate on Christ’s Passion it’s to do just *that*, to meditate on His *passion*. His passion for *you*. His undying, unswerving, unrelenting love for you. How He would rather die than see anything bad happen to you. That’s what today’s about—experiencing the passion that burns in the heart of Your Savior; that He would go through all that *for you*.

Denis Avey was a British soldier who served during World War II. He found himself captured by the Germans and imprisoned in a camp connected to Auschwitz, one of the Nazi’s most notorious concentration camps. Maybe to our surprise—maybe even to *his* surprise—though Denis was a Prisoner of War, he was still treated fairly well and enjoyed relative freedom, which even included sending and receiving letters from home. In one of those letters, Denis described himself as a fiery red head with “a temperament to match. Nothing would stop me,” he wrote. Denis had heard rumors about the horrors going on inside the main camp, and he was so moved by the stories about the gas chambers, that he

just had to know the truth. If these stories were real, he thought, then the world had to know so something could be done.

Well, believe it or not, Denis put his concern for these suffering people above his own wellbeing. He knew his life would be at risk, but to him going into that camp was the only way to bring about freedom and safety for those imprisoned at Auschwitz. So, after careful planning, Denis gained the trust of a Jewish inmate, who agreed to swap places with him for one night at a time. His uniform—a symbol of honor—was exchanged for the filthy, worn out, striped garments that the inmate wore. The nourishing rations he received at the British camp were traded for the meager and unpalatable slop that the Jewish prisoners had to choke down. And the good night's sleep that Denis enjoyed in his bunk was swapped out for the restless nights and unfit conditions that the others were forced to endure.

Denis described his experience at the camp as “hell on earth,” recounting how he would lie awake at night listening to the ramblings and screams of the prisoners. He said, “It was pretty ghastly at night, you got this terrible stench.” When Denis tried talking to the other Jewish prisoners, he quickly found they didn't say much about life before Auschwitz. No, that was but a distant memory to them compared to the living hell they faced everyday in the factories outside the camp. “There were nearly three million human beings,” Denis said, “worked to death in different factories. They knew at that rate they'd last [no more than] five months.”

While an amazing story so far of incredible bravery, that's not even the best part. You see, when Denis was in the camp, he met another Jewish prisoner named Ernst Lobethall. Ernst told him that his sister, Susana, had managed to escape to England as a child. So when he got back to his own British camp, Denis got busy looking Susana up. He got in touch with her via a coded letter sent home to his mother. In that letter, he arranged for cigarettes, chocolate, and a letter from Susanna to be sent to him so he could smuggle them into Ernst's camp. For Ernst, cigarettes were like currency—more valuable than gold even—and Ernst could trade them for favors, which could make his life easier. For example, two of those packs were exchanged for getting his shoes resoled.

Many years later, after the war had ended, Ernst—now a *survivor* of the holocaust—moved to America, where he got married and had children and lived a long and happy life. But before he eventually died, Ernst recorded his survival story on video. He spoke of his friendship with a British soldier in Auschwitz, who he simply called “Ginger.” Ernst said it was only because of that British soldier, who risked it all for Ernst, that Ernst was still alive to that day.

He told of how when the Nazis realized they were losing, they let out all the prisoners from the camps, forcing them to make a brutal death march for miles and miles through thick and heavy snow. Well, while 15,000 people died in that march, Ernst recounts how he survived. It was all because of those resoled shoes that he got with those smuggled cigarettes. Just imagine Ernst looking into the camera right now. “That ‘Ginger’” he says, fighting back the tears, “that ‘Ginger’ who came into my camp very well saved my life. He put his life on the line, just to help me.”

The Bible tells us Jesus came into our world, so He'd be the one who

“has borne our griefs

and carried our sorrows;

yet we esteemed Him stricken,

smitten by God, and afflicted.

But He was pierced for our transgressions;

He was crushed for our iniquities;

upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace,

and with His wounds we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray;

we have turned—every one—to his own way;

04.14.2017
Good Friday
The Way of the Cross

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and the LORD has laid on Him
the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4-6)

For our sake, God made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Christ Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:24)

Jesus took our place, He went through hell for us, to make survivors out of us. He exchanged heaven for earth, His righteousness for our sins, His life for our death. All so that you and I can go free.

It was April of 1945. Paul Schneiderman was twenty-three years old when the SS herded him and the others from Dachau into a cattle car to be shuttled off to who knows where. "One night," he remembers, "the train stopped in the middle of the forest. Snow fell from the sky and settled on my eyelashes. I was cold, I was hungry, [. . .] but I was strangely at peace." He could hear the Germans and the Allies shooting at each other.

And then, Paul says, "as quickly as the battle started, it stopped. Silence returned. Dawn rose over the hills. . . . My friend Yitzhak and I lay on the floor . . . listening for the slightest sound. In the distance, we heard it, coming from the cars ahead of us: Loud, jubilant voices, speaking in Yiddish, '*Mir zenen frei! Mir zenen frei!*' "We are free at last!"

Tonight, as you and I meditate on Christ's Passion, let us realize what it means for us, what it *really* means for us. May it not just be a meditation for up here (head) . . . *but in here* (heart). Because when it is, you'll be walking out of here with a loud, jubilant voice, shouting, "*Mir zenen frei! Mir zenen frei!*" Our Ally, Jesus Christ, has come. The battle's over. You and I, "We are free at last!"