

Sermon: The Agony in the Garden**Scripture: Matthew 26:36-46****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: March 22, 2026**

We're doing a jump in our scripture texts here as Lent comes to a close. Usually churches wait til Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday to engage the passion story, if at all, but there are so many rich moments in Jesus' passion that I thought I would draw out one this Sunday, the 5th Sunday of Lent, and another next Sunday which is Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week.

Today it's Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, that profound and quiet moment on the edge of everything that is to come next, a moment of prayer that is agonizing for him, which is why it's often called the Agony in the Garden. It contains one of the most famous and well-regarded lines in all our sacred scriptures: "Not my will but yours be done". There is so much to consider in this scene and this morning I want to lift up a few.

First of all, as obvious as it is, it's worth noting that Jesus suffers this moment of prayer deeply. He's not in physical pain at this point but in emotional or psychological pain. The Gospel of Luke's rendition says "his sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground". Matthew's Gospel has various translations and some of them say "he was heavy with sorrow" while other translations say - "his soul was crushed by sorrow."

Jesus' pain seems not so much to be anticipatory pain for the physical suffering he'll face on the crucifixion, but it's the pain of sorrow and grief which must have had something to do with knowing he would be abandoned by those he love, but also because Jesus lived so fully and with

such gusto that I imagine the sorrow was significantly about his earthly life drawing to a close. It's worth remembering that Jesus who is our spiritual master, the one to whom we turn for spiritual knowledge and wisdom for how to live, the one we say was fully human and fully divine, didn't go out in a state of zen-like peaceful acceptance, transcending the human frame to gain some divine state of perfect ease.

Jesus resisted and struggled and cried and agonized over his path and what was to come and he wrestled with God over it.

He had the sense that it was going to be hard... I mean, really hard and so he took some time to pray, to spend some time grappling over it with God. And he asked his friends to be there with him, not to solve anything or come up with some alternative plan or escape route for him but just to BE with him, there in the garden, to pray while he was praying. Sometimes that is all we need, to know that the people around us, although they cannot walk the path we are walking, are there with us and holding us by being present. It's good to remember, for those of us who are fixers and advice givers and managers of situations, that what is most needed in times of great sorrow or suffering is usually simple presence, showing up, being there.

It is sad that Jesus asked for 3 of the disciples to hold this moment with him, to be there for him and that they were unable to do so. They went there with him but they all fell asleep and Jesus felt their absence: "You could not keep watch with me for one hour?" Can you imagine, how that lived in those disciples in the days (and maybe years) to come, that they couldn't stay awake with him in his great hour of need, just before he was arrested and taken from them? The disciples never cease to be a reminder to us of how it is not our merit that gains us access to God and love from

God. They failed time and time again to get him, to understand him, to do the right thing, and he loved them and chose them nonetheless. There was only one disciple who didn't last with Jesus and that was only because he chose to walk away - Judas, the one who at the end of this scene betrayed him with a kiss.

And then also in this scene we see how Jesus prayed and we realize further what the agony was about, that it is SO difficult sometimes for us to give ourselves over willingly to what life is doling out to us. We DO have this very human capacity to manage and control situations in our lives to some extent and gear things to how we want them to be, but there always also comes a point where we must relinquish control, when we must accept that things are simply as they are and stop working to change them or make it other than what it is. Don't tragedies in our lives often have this quality to them where we can't believe or accept what has just happened. There's this "no, no, no, no," resistance to what we are facing and then if we can get there, this letting go and humble acceptance. "Oh, this is how it is. This is my lot that I cannot change." A new reality comes, a new life in a certain way begins and we realize humbly that ultimately we are not in charge. Like Jesus experienced it can be agonizing to let go of how things were previously or how we might want and imagine they could be... but eventually we let go into that new reality... or we go the way of Judas and turn our lives into a long and intractable resistance until we can see no choice but resisting life itself.

The mystic teacher Cynthia Bourgeault believes that this process or dynamic gets us to the heart of the human journey and the core of the Christian spiritual path. The one necessary thing here in this life, she says,

is to die to the self.¹ Kenosis is the Greek word for it, translated as self-surrender. It's hard enough to do when something has happened to us that we have no control over, much less to choose a surrendering of the self for some greater purpose, which is what Jesus must do. As Bourgeault describes it, there is this gap often between how we want things to be and what is or what needs to be... or what we want it to be and what God would have it be and Jesus agonized over this, he bargained with God over it, "can you please take this cup from me? Isn't there another way?" But finally in the end he threw himself across the gap with the words,

"Not my will but yours be done".

Jesus had taught this to the people, maybe not even realizing himself how truly difficult it would be to live it, that we must lose ourselves in order to find ourselves. In John chapter 12 he describes it by saying "unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone as one grain, but if it dies, it brings forth much fruit." That's the thing that Jesus' path exemplifies and teaches, that self-surrender is painful, agonizing even, it's a death, BUT if we can do it, it can also be generative. The heart of the human journey, Cynthia Bourgeault explains, is "to grow beyond the survival instinct of the animal brain and the egoic operating system, that cares primarily and only for the self and into the kenotic or self-surrendering generosity of full personhood."²

This was the path that Jesus was suffering in the garden that night so that his Spirit might accompany us in future times when we need to make that journey across that gap ourselves. As Jesus showed, it is not for the faint of heart, it is the narrow way and does not garner you the riches of the

¹ Bourgeault, Cynthia. *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind - A New Perspective on Christ and His Message*. Shambala 2008. P. 109

² Ibid. p.106

world or the fame and respect necessarily that the willful insistence on getting as much as you can for as long as you can do, but it is Wisdom's Way that Jesus taught and what you get is the abundance of God which is quite different from the abundance of man. Jesus put it this way "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."³

Ten little verses describing Jesus in the garden contain so much of the Gospel and the phrase that has become a mantra for self-surrender - "Not my will but yours be done, O God." Or as he will say from the cross - similarly - "into your hands I commit my spirit." He's quoting Psalm 31 which goes like this - "Since you are my rock and my fortress, O God, for the sake of your name lead and guide me. Keep me free from the trap that is set for me, for you are my refuge. Into your hands I commit my spirit; deliver me, Lord, my faithful God." A prayer of self-surrender. That's what we have given you this morning as well, a prayer of self-surrender for you to pray when you need it. It comes from The Celtic Book of Prayer from the Northumbria Community in Northeast England. (Sorry we left off the attribution but it's from the Trappist monk, Charles de Foucauld). Try praying in these remaining weeks of Lent and see what effect the intentional handing over of your life to God might have on you and others.

It's essentially the prayer Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, which was actually more an olive grove than a garden. And have you ever seen old trees in an olive grove like the one outside of Jerusalem? They look like this: with gnarled knotted branches and twisting trunks. It looks almost like the material manifestation of agony, doesn't it? And you know

³ Matthew 7:13-14

the fruit of those trees, the olives themselves are a bitter fruit. And it is only when they are crushed and hard-pressed that precious nutritious olive oil is yielded.

Jesus eventually chooses the way of the olive tree and despite his resistance and struggle and cries and soul crushing sorrow, he doesn't run away or fight, he humbly relinquishes himself, he receives Judas who presses upon him a kiss. He's arrested by the authorities and walked out of the garden, a prisoner of the powers, but as he follows God's path for him he awakens a great Spirit, through his self-surrender, the seed in the soil cracking open, the oil running down from the crushed olives and as a result, come Easter a few days later the world will be forever changed.