

Sermon Text for March 10, 2024

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Psalm 42:1-6, Matthew 26:36-46

“Jesus in agony”

This past week was a bit unusual for me. After worship last week I pretty much lost my voice and felt a bit puny. I hear, not sure I believe it, that when guys get sick they are a bit more needy than when women get sick. I definitely wanted a little bit of sympathy and I got a bit, but not nearly the amount that I thought I was due. I’m still not perfect but I would think that me just raising it might win me a bit of sympathy.

On a more serious note, there is something about going through a life experience which might be considered by most as traumatic and just needing some companionship, some presence which reminds you that you are not isolated. I have received phone calls from family members at 2 in the morning whose spouse or child or loved one has died and they just simply say: I need you here, I don’t want to be alone or I just need your presence. There is something about going through the agony of the soul that demands that we not go through it alone, either without the presence of God whom we can feel and experience, or without the presence of a brother or sister in Christ who will just stay awake with us and be by our side as we go through whatever valley of the shadow of death we may be experiencing.

We find ourselves in the thick of what is called the passion of Christ. This passion isn’t just his torture upon the cross, but it is the torture of his soul and his emotions as he awaits his fate which he knows is coming very soon. Both Scriptures that we look at today speak to a sense of abandonment that we might feel, from friends and from God, when we are faced with the agony of our soul for a tragedy or whatever may be happening in our lives, an unexpected divorce, the loss of a job, whatever it may be.

The title of our sermon for today is Jesus in agony, and even when we say that we are reminded of his humanity. We don’t just say that Jesus was human but don’t really believe it, we believe it because we see him have thirst, we see him weep, we see him in agony. He was fully human, just like any of us, and his needs are similar to ours. But we also see that he was willing to pursue God’s providence and he knew that the will of God, His Father, the plan of God of which he was such an intricate part, had to be carried out. Let’s read.

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Go to Psalm 42. Don't you love Psalm 42, it is so full of emotion that we have a song that is known all over the world. When we were in Italy this as the deer was a favorite for the church and we would sing it with gusto. It created a sense that God was with us and that we were fully in the presence of God without any doubt. But if you actually read the Psalm, the opposite could be said is the actual content of the Psalm. We assume because of its beauty that it speaks to the clear presence of God and our necessary desire to be in his presence.

But instead it is actually a lament, a crying out to God because the author feels abandoned by God and by his friends of faith in the actual moment when he needs them the most. The overriding question that he asks in this Psalm is: When will I see God? He longs to see God just as the deer longs for flowing streams to quench his thirst. But he simply hasn't. We find here a person who is in agony because they cannot experience the presence of God as they would want in this particular time in their life. Look at vs.9, a little later on than where we read, and the author states: I say to my God, why have you forgotten. This echoes back to Jesus' words on the cross from Psalm 22, not this Psalm: My God, My God why have you forsaken me? The agony of feeling abandoned by God is real, and it is reflected in this Psalm.

But it isn't just feeling like God has abandoned you, it is also feeling like your friends, your family of faith has abandoned you as well. You are going through this agony, whatever it may be, you feel as if you are going through it alone. Verse 3 has the people surrounding him asking him where is your God? He remembers fondly going into Jerusalem with them in vs.4 in happier times with glad shouts of thanksgiving, but now they ask where is God again in vs. 10.

We find in this Psalm not the quaint, beautiful poetic presence of God, but rather a person of God who finds himself in agony and his greatest yearning is for companionship. He just wants to be accompanied on his journey with his friends of faith and with God himself. Is that too much to ask, but he does ask for it in this Psalm.

We find a similar request by Jesus himself as he finds himself in agony in Matthew 26 as we continue along in our journey of Lent in Matthew 26. Jesus and his disciples have left the upper room and have headed across the Kidron Valley and are on the Mount of Olives and Jesus takes them into what is called the Garden of Gethsemane, which Gethsemane means literally garden of oil, so it is a bit redundant to say Garden of Gethsemane, but that's what we have. This scene is very different from what we have grown up thinking it was about.

You know how we spoke about Christmas and some of the myths of Christmas that we debunked, like how many wise men, the presence of a donkey, Jesus in a house when the wise

men come etc. Well, normally here in this scene we have this romantic image of Jesus all by himself with just his disciples. That couldn't be further from the truth. Jerusalem was absolutely overrun with pilgrims and each of them, like Jesus and his disciples, were looking for a quiet place where they could rest for the night, outdoors, but someplace quiet and secluded. But with the numbers of people in Jerusalem that would have been impossible.

Today the garden of Gethsemane is on the busiest road going into Jerusalem. There is a church where an ancient olive tree is growing outdoors, and with the throngs that are there today it is hard to catch a glimpse of what we think it might have been like. But across the street from the church your group can reserve a time in a quiet, walled off, garden filled with olive trees to give you the real feel for what you think in your mind it was like. But it was never like that in Jesus' time around the days of Passover. The busy chaotic scene at the church is much more realistic than the quiet personalized experience that groups are able to have. Oh, we try to do it every year because I like that romantic image, even if it isn't at all accurate as to how it was in Jesus' day.

That gives the kiss of Judas a different perspective if there are people milling around and the authorities are afraid of a riot because there are people everywhere when they arrest Jesus. It was not a quiet peaceful scene, like Psalm 42 is not a quiet peaceful Psalm about the presence of God, it was a chaotic confused scene where Jesus was present and was in agony. Let's look at the agony of Jesus in this scene. Go to vs.37 when he takes Peter James and John because, the Scripture states, he was grieved and agitated. Vs. 38 he tells them that he was deeply grieved even to death. The Greek is my soul is grieved to the point of death. Vs. 39 he throws himself down onto the ground, the Greek says that he falls on his face.

As a side note, the taking with him James and John who are lifted up, is not something to pass over. They were the first disciples that he calls, they were with him in the transfiguration, their mom has a special request for Jesus that they be one on his right hand and the other on his left when he is in his kingdom. Look at Matthew 20 where this takes place, vs.22 Jesus answers and basically says you can't drink the cup that I am about to drink. The same cup that he asks his father in these verses three times to take away from him. We find in the Old Testament in Jeremiah and in Ezekiel a reference to the cup which was death and suffering. Jesus knew what he was facing and he asked three times, if it was at all possible, to have that cup taken from him.

In the midst of all this we can see so clearly that in Jesus' agony he was fully human. Jesus flinches when faced with a certain upcoming torture, just as we would. He looks like any

of us here, capable of fear and anxiety. My soul is at the point of death. When we see Jesus falling on his face in prayer, what we don't see is a stoic philosopher contemplating his future. This is raw, very raw and if we can't recognize the rawness of Jesus in his passion, in this season of Lent, then when can we.

In the midst of this agony he only asks for one thing for his disciples, that they would stay awake with him. He is asking for companionship here. Similarly, when he is on the cross he cries out, My God, My God, he is calling out for companionship for his God. We have both here, Jesus asking to be accompanied on this difficult journey that he is on.

But at the end of the day, all that happens here is in God's plan. This is central to the narrative. Jesus in agony still submits, he chooses not to call on a legion of angels to come and rescue him, even though later he says that he could easily do so. In his agony and in his desire for companionship through this valley of the shadow of death, he is still focused on doing the will of God.

Throughout this Scripture you can see the Lord's Prayer as an underlying theme. We see Jesus begin his prayer in vs.39 with My Father, which is very close to what he told his disciples to pray: Our Father. We see in his actual prayer three times, in vs.39, 42, and we assume in 44 the words: let your will be done. In vs. 41 he warns the disciples that they should fall into temptation. Jesus in his time of agony submits to the Father, he is not resigned, he is not defeated, he chooses to accept the will of his Father over whatever desire the flesh might have, for self preservation. We see that reflected in Philippians 2:8 where he chose to humble himself, to do the will of God, even all the way to death on a cross.

Do you see how much Jesus loves us in his agony? Even in his agony he chose to do God's will which translates into our victory. In Hebrews 5 we read in vs.8 that Jesus was obedient, what a concept, that Jesus freely offered himself for us even when he had a chance to get out of it, he chose to submit for our sake.

The goal for Jesus was not escape, but victory. And even though we are talking about the agony of Jesus, you can't have Good Friday without Easter Sunday. We may ask ourselves, if God is all-powerful, can't he destroy evil without making his son the victim? The answer is no, this is all part of God's plan. The agony of Jesus is for our sake, so that in the end the victory over death and dying will be complete. Praise be to God. Amen.