

TEACH US TO PRAY: JESUS

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Matthew 26:36-46

We started off the month of November by setting our clocks back one hour for Daylight Savings Time. Several times during the week leading up to that change, different friends forwarded to me an internet meme that showed a picture of Kermit the Frog. Written above him were the words, “I’m not turning my clock back on Sunday. The last thing we need is an extra hour of 2020.” I believe this sentiment expresses the feeling we all share about this year with its caustic politics and infection COVID and all. We just want this year to be over.

Twenty years ago, in the year 2000, all of our computers were supposed to crash and bring society to a standstill. And 2012 was supposed to be the year that the world ended in cataclysm as the Mayans predicted.

The year 2020, however, was supposed to be a magical year. 20/20 denotes perfect vision. The idea of the year 2020 and perfect vision was seized upon by every organization on the planet as part of their long-range goal-setting. Well over five years ago, our own presbytery began a massive restructuring project called Vision 2020. We had numerous meetings and discussions to contemplate where we wanted to be in the year 2020. What part of our mission was outdated? How could we conform to the needs of tomorrow? How could we be a modern and responsive church? We felt like we were looking into the future.

Looking back, I wonder if while sitting in one of those meetings planning for 2020, my future-self were to show up and begin telling me what 2020 would actually be like, I don’t think I would have believed him/me. Future-me would say, “In 2020, all churches will be closed most of the year. You will lead worship on the Internet.” And then I would ask my future-self, “If I’m preaching on the internet, I must be famous, right? And future-self would say, “No. You’re just like every other preacher just trying to get by. Oh, and you should start stocking up on toilet paper and hand sanitizer. You’ll need it.”

It is now 2020, and we know how it has turned out. But the good news is that today marks the start of a new year. We’ll still have 2020 for another month, but today marks the beginning of a new church year. Today is the First Sunday of Advent. Advent last for four Sundays and concludes with the arrival of Christmas.

Traditionally, we view the four weeks of Advent as a time of preparation—a time to prepare ourselves for the Christmas event. But Christmas is more than just the arrival of a baby. Preparation for Christmas means preparing for the coming of God’s kingdom. The baby is just a sign of the kingdom. The child is Emmanuel—God with us—and his arrival signifies the convergence of heaven and earth.

Our reading for today takes us as far from a birth as one can get. Our reading is the account of Jesus praying to God that God may spare his life. I'm bringing you this scripture as part of our Fall Sermon Series called Teach Us To Pray. In this series we look at some of the many prayers we find in our scriptures—moments when people open their hearts and pour out their souls to the Lord. And each week, I ask you to consider what we learn from that prayer.

The story, as we read it today, comes to us from the Gospel of Matthew. It is the part of the gospel story that we call the Passion—that final period of Jesus's life. For Matthew, the Passion begins when Judas goes to the chief priest and makes a deal to hand Jesus over to them. Judas returns and joins the rest of the disciples for their celebration of the Passover meal. At this meal Jesus institutes what we call the Eucharist. He breaks the bread saying, *Take, eat; this is my body*. He holds the cup and says, *This is my blood of the covenant*.

After the meal, Jesus announces to the disciples that they will all desert him that very night. Peter objects saying, *I will never desert you*. And Jesus tells him, *Yes, you will. Three times before dawn*. Peter argues, *I will die with you. I will not deny you*.

Then Jesus leads the disciples outside the city and down across the Kidron Valley, and then back up the slope of the hill known as the Mount of Olives. He takes them to a place called Gethsemane—a word which in Hebrew means “oil press.” At that place, he instructs his disciples to sit and wait while he prays. He takes with him the three disciples who had been with him the longest—Peter, James, and John. He explains to them that he is *grieved* and *distressed* and his end is near. *Stay here*, he says, *and stay awake with me*. He walks a few more steps and falls to the ground in prayer. He prays, *My father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want*.

This is Jesus' prayer. In it he addresses God as *my father*, and asks, *If it is possible, let this cup pass from me*. Earlier that evening, at the Passover meal, he held up the cup of wine and said, *This cup is my blood of the covenant*. Jesus understands that the cup represents his death—filled with his blood, the blood of the covenant. Jewish law forbids Jews from drinking blood, but blood (animal blood) was crucial to the establishment of a covenant. God's great covenant, which was made in blood, promised that God would never forsake or abandon his people. The life of Jesus is the ultimate expression of that covenant. The blood of God must be shed for the fulfillment of that promise.

Jesus is fully God, but also fully human, and in this prayer we witness his humanity as he dreads what must come to pass. He opens his heart and pours out his soul saying, *If it is possible, spare me*. And then he concludes saying, *Yet not what I want, but what you want*. And here is something to learn from this prayer.

We freely make our requests of God, but we should do so knowing that ultimately it is God's to decide. It is not our wants, but God's wants.

Having prayed for awhile, Jesus goes back to Peter, James, and John and finds them asleep. Of course they are asleep. They've had an eventful day and a big meal. It is late and dark and they are just sitting around watching a friend pray.

Jesus is disturbed by this and he asks Peter, *Couldn't you stay awake just an hour? You should be over here watching and praying that your time of trial will not come. Your intentions are good, but your flesh is weak.*

Jesus then steps away and repeats his prayer. When he is done, again he finds Peter and the rest to be asleep. This happens again for a third time when finally Jesus wakes the disciples and says, *Are you still napping? The time is here and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up. It is time to go. My betrayer is here.* And as he says this, Judas approaches leading an armed cohort coming for Jesus. They will take him away and the next day will execute him.

What we find in this prayer of Jesus is his unswerving devotion to God, his willingness to be a sacrifice. He knows how this will play out and he asks God if perhaps there is another way. But there is not. This is God's will—God's plan—and Jesus complies. When we pray, we ask, but do we give? Do we commit ourselves to God or do we just always ask for something? Do we mean it when we say, "Your will be done?"

We observe Advent as a time of preparation. During this season we prepare for the birth which signals the coming of God into our lives. This birth took place two-thousand years ago and the cycle of Advent is an annual reminder of our need for our continued vigilance and watchfulness. We should not be like the disciples who slept. We should seek to be watchful; we should strive to be alert. Every moment of our lives should be dedicated to readying ourselves for God's holy realm.

At the Passover meal, Jesus warned that Peter would deny him three times. We know that later that night, after Jesus is arrested, he in fact does deny knowing Jesus. But I really can't fault Peter for that. If he had announced himself he may have been arrested as well. And he doesn't deny knowing Jesus to the officials, but just to some people gathered around a fire. Ultimately, Peter's saying "I don't know him," does not affect happens to Jesus. In my opinion, the real denial came when Jesus was praying there at Gethsemane. *Stay awake*, Jesus says, but three times Peter failed him. He could not keep his eyes open even an hour in support of his friend. When he prays, Jesus is fully alert to God's will, while at the same time, Peter and the others slumber through their friend's time of anguish. One could argue that Jesus needed his friends now more than ever.

Advent is our alarm clock to wake up, to get moving, attack the day, and get ready for the kingdom. Jesus is clear about his mission. He is resolute in his purpose. He knows what he is doing. He is saving us. He is awake when we are napping. As Christ, he embodies God's will for our salvation.