

A WEEK OF HOLY TERROR:

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Mark 14:32-50

Each week we pray the Lord's Prayer: *Our Father, who art in heaven. And within this prayer, we also pray the words, Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* But what exactly does it mean to ask, *Thy will be done?* What is God's will? And I will tell you truthfully, I don't know. It would be quite arrogant of me to say what God's will is. I don't understand the depths of God's heart any more than I understand the depths of your hearts. However, after 40 years of theological study, I do have a few ideas based on clues that we find in Scripture.

Now, the first clue is the big one: God created. God created the heavens and the earth, all that is in it, and God created us. God did this out of love. God is love, and God desires to love us, and that we love God. God desires to be in relationship with us. After all, God made us in God's image. So, God made us to love.

Another clue is the covenant. God made a covenant with us, a covenant to be our God, and we would be God's people. Now, God didn't make us like toys to be wound up and allowed to scatter and go anywhere. No, God made us to be with God. But unfortunately, yes, we do have a propensity to wander off mindlessly like little toys. When that happens, God calls us back. God reaches out, goes to where we are, and brings us back. God's will is that we coexist in this divine relationship. And how we live our lives is a reflection of that relationship.

Now, through this season of Lent, I'm preaching a sermon series I've entitled, *A Week of Holy Terror*. And through this series I want to focus on one of the many important events that take place from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday. And today, we're looking at the events of the evening of what we call Holy Thursday.

So, what's taking place then? Well, primarily, Jesus and his disciples have prepared for and celebrated the Passover Meal. They gathered together in that room and celebrated this holy feast—the reason that all the thousands of pilgrims had descended upon Jerusalem this week. It's Passover. And in this Passover Meal, which we also call the Last Supper, Jesus institutes the sacrament of communion. And we'll be looking at that story in two weeks.

When the meal is done, of course, it is dark outside, and Jesus leads the disciples out of Jerusalem through the wall at the gate, down the Kidron Valley, and then back up the slope of the Mount of Olives. And he takes them to a place there that is known as Gethsemane. They knew where it was; they'd all been there many times before. This is a good place to get out of the city and away from the hustle and bustle, especially now that there were so many visitors there from out of

town. It was a good, quiet place, a place from which you had a view of the city and of the temple gleaming in marble and gold.

Jesus takes them to Gethsemane, and when they get there, he tells his disciples to wait. *Sit here*, he says, *wait here*. And then he picks Peter, James, and John—the three that he probably knows the best and is closest to, the ones he called first—and asks them to come with him a little further into this olive orchard. He tells them to sit in this place. But they recognize that something's off here. Jesus is distressed, he's agitated. He even admits to them, *I am deeply grieved, even to death. But I want you to stay here, and most of all, stay awake*. And then Jesus himself goes just a little further, and he drops to the ground and he prays. He prays to God that, if at all possible, the events that are about to come, well, may they not. As he said, *May this hour pass from me*. And he calls out to God, *God, Abba, Father, I know that for you, all things are indeed possible, but this cup, remove it from me. Yet not what I want, but what you want*. And that was the essence of his prayer.

He prayed for an hour or so. And when he was finished he goes back to Peter, James, and John, and despite his requests that they stay awake, they're asleep. It's been a long day, and they've had a big meal, and it's late. They couldn't help themselves, could they? But he wakes them up and says, *Please, just stay awake another hour. That's all I want. Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial*. And he goes back and this whole scene repeats itself. Jesus prays, he goes back, finds them asleep, he wakes them up, he goes back and prays a third time. And again, he goes back, and he finds them sleeping, and he says, *Enough. This is it. The hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up. Let us be going. My betrayer is here*.

And we look over a little ways, and we see torches, because here comes Judas, one of the twelve, one of the disciples, one of those that Jesus has chosen. But he's got a crowd—a mob—with him, and they're waving swords and clubs. They've come from the home of the chief priest. They're looking for Jesus.

But it's hard to see in the dark, especially looking for someone they may not know what he looks like. Judas' job is to show them who they are there to arrest, and he's provided them with a sign. He says, 'The one I kiss, that's the one.' And a kiss, well, that's how a student greets their teacher, their rabbi. And so, Judas goes up to Jesus, and he says, 'Rabbi,' and kisses him. And immediately the crowd lays their hands on Jesus and arrests him. Jesus doesn't try to resist. But there is some conflict. One of the disciples pulls out a knife, and I'm sure he's just waving it around in the dark, and in doing so, he hits the slave of the chief priest, cutting off the slave's ear. And Jesus stops them, and he asks, *Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit or a thief or a robber?* You know, like the robbers that would be on each side of him at the crucifixion. *Day after day*, he says, *I was with you in the temple, teaching out in the open, but you didn't arrest me there*. They took him away. And his disciples deserted him and fled.

The title of my sermon series is *A Week of Holy Terror*. And I've called it this because as you read through the events of Holy Week, you see all the terrible things that happen to Jesus. He's betrayed, he's arrested, tried twice, beaten, tortured, and then publicly crucified. You wouldn't wish any of these things on anyone. Yet they all happen to Jesus in this week. It's truly a week of holy terror. And I would argue that the most painful moment of this entire week, of all that happens to Jesus, happens in this reading for today. And it's not the arrest. It's not the betrayal by Judas. No, I believe the most painful moment of this reading is found in Jesus' time of prayer when he is talking with God. This is the low point; this is the moment of darkness; this is the moment of hopelessness and helplessness. Why? Because it is here that Jesus sees and fully realizes the hell that he must endure. And I mean this literally.

So, what is hell? Well, we all have our images of hell, of fire and damnation and smoke and brimstone. But probably the most famous description of hell is given to us by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri in his epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*. And here, he describes hell in great detail as being concentric circles or levels. The greater your sins on Earth, the greater your punishment in hell. At the very center of hell, there are only two people. One is some Italian that the people of Dante's day would recognize, and the other is Judas. And what is Judas' punishment here? He is frozen in a great ball of ice. Frozen.

Is hell like this? This is Dante's imagination at work. I don't know what hell is. As we say, only one person has been to hell and come back, and he didn't tell us anything about it. But hell, as I understand it, in its simplest form, is simply where God is not. Hell is the absence of God. And for Jesus, this is the worst thing imaginable. Because Jesus, more than anything, desires a relationship with God, just as God desires a relationship with us.

Jesus was made to be in relationship with God. And now, here in Gethsemane, as he prays and looks into the future understanding God's plan, he realizes that he must go through hell. He is going to be removed from God's presence. Jesus also wants a relationship with people, with his friends. And yet, even they abandoned him. Peter, James, and John can't even stay awake while Jesus was talking to God. And yet, Jesus is still willing to go through with this plan because he prays, *Not what I want, but what you want. Thy will be done.*

And how is it that Jesus maintains this relationship with God? It is through constant prayer. How many times in Scripture do we read that Jesus went away to a quiet place, up a mountain to pray? He is one with his God in prayer.

Prayer is a conversation. It is talking to God, but it is also listening to God. Prayer is when we open ourselves to bring God into our hearts. Prayer is accepting God's will as our own.

Remember the story of Jesus' temptation? Jesus goes off into the wilderness for forty days to fast and pray. Satan comes to him with temptations—temptations of comfort, of wealth, of power—and Jesus turns them all down. They're good offers but Jesus knows that they will go against God's will and would break his relationship. And so, nothing that Satan offers him is worth losing that relationship.

And here in Gethsemane, he prays about a cup. *Let this cup pass from me.* And we often associate the cup with his blood because we have just come from the Passover Meal where he lifts up the cup and says, *This is my blood.* And we assume that it's a reference to the pain and the suffering, the abuse and torture, even the crucifixion that he is going to experience in the next couple of days. And it may be. But I think it's more than that. This cup is the sacrifice that he is going to make for us.

We've talked about Jesus taking our sins away—taking away the sins of the world. And when we think of this, we usually think of our everyday sins—lying, stealing, envy, lust, gluttony, etc. But I don't believe that Jesus is concerned with those sins at all. Jesus is more concerned with our losing our relationship with God. That is the great sin. And he is willing to go to hell for us, so that we don't have to. He loses his relationship, his connection with the Lord, so that we can keep it. He pays the cost of our sin for those times when we've turned away from God, when we've broken our relationship with God.

So, during this season of Lent, I would like for you to focus on your relationship with God through prayer, through reflection, through service, through whatever means necessary. And remember the price that Christ paid for you.

And I want to close with the words of a great hymn that is appropriate at this time, *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, and those words in there: *As he died to make men holy, let us live to make men free.* Amen.