

"Go to Dark Gethsemane"

A Sermon for Maundy Thursday on Matthew 26:36-46 by Kyle G. Jones

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, our Lord Jesus Christ.

"For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."¹ These words from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians are on display in our gospel reading for this Maundy Thursday.

The Jesus we see praying at Gethsemane makes us uncomfortable, nervous, and even anxious. The sight can trouble us almost as much as Jesus' impending suffering and death troubled him. In one sense, this is good. It challenges any misguided assumptions we may have about who Jesus is and what he came to do.

At Gethsemane, we can no longer picture him as the near-emotionless stoic or the strong silent type as he's often depicted. That's not who we see here. Here, he trembles. Here, he's sorrowful to the point of death. Here, he falls on his face and prays in earnest desperation as "his sweat became like great drops of blood," as Luke records for us in his gospel.² Here, he's no longer the quick-witted rabbi, unflappable under pressure from cultural, political, and religious leaders.

Here, in our eyes, he is weak. We think: he's not supposed to act this way, have these struggles, or pray these prayers. He is the Christ who comes in the name of the Lord, the righteous obedient Son of the Father. But here he is, doing and saying things that unsettle us and make us squirm.

At Gethsemane, Jesus faces his greatest temptation. And at this moment he takes to heart David's words in Psalm 55, "Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you."³ Only, his prayer unsettles us even more than his actions. "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet, not as I will, but as you will."⁴ Because Jesus is fully man and fully God, his seeming hesitation to want to do God's will creates a dissonance in our understanding of him. There is an amount of mystery in his prayer that we can't overcome.

But while Jesus' words, "if it is possible," trouble us the most, we should not overlook the importance of his opening address. He calls on God as his Father and does so as the perfect Son in a faithful relationship with him. In this time of great and unimaginable struggle, Jesus still trusts in God as his Father. And this trust carries through to both the end of the prayer and the end of his time at Gethsemane.

The cup Jesus speaks of is none other than the wrath of God toward sin that he is about to drink in his suffering and death at the hands of sinners. But only by drinking the cup does Jesus make it possible for his disciples (and that includes us) to drink from the cup he spoke of before their time at Gethsemane. "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."⁵ This cup contains his blood which pays for the forgiveness of your sins. Jesus drank the cup of wrath so you can drink the cup of grace.

Jesus ends his prayer with the ultimate show of trust in the Father, "Yet, not as I will, but as you will." It is logically possible that the Father could take this cup and bring salvation another way. By definition, God can do anything. But the logical possibility does *not* change the reality. The will of the Father will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:25

² Luke 22:44

³ Psalm 55:22

⁴ Matthew 26:39

⁵ Luke 22:20

Jesus knows full well his rejection, suffering, and death *must* happen. He predicted it; foreshadowed it. Its benefits are delivered to those who receive in faith the meal he instituted in the upper room.

At Gethsemane, we rightly focus on Jesus. He is at the center of it all, which is why we can be so troubled by what we see. But it is what we see of the disciples that should trouble us the most.

Jesus becomes more isolated from them as the night goes on. There's a literal physical distance between them. Judas left the upper room before the rest to set in motion his previous-agreed-upon betrayal in the coming hours. At Gethsemane, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John farther on and leaves the rest of the disciples behind. Then, he leaves Peter, and the sons of Zebedee, going a stone's throw away to pray alone.

Each time Jesus returns from praying, he finds the three even farther away from him. While he struggles, they sleep. The first time, he wakes them with an exhortation, "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."⁶

All the disciples fail at Gethsemane, but Peter, James, and John, who make up Jesus' inner circle, fail particularly hard. James Voelz points out that these three disciples are also the disciples who are most full of themselves.⁷

James and John display their arrogance on the journey to Jerusalem by asking Jesus if they could sit at his left and right in the earthly kingdom they presumed he came to establish. Jesus replied, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup I drink?" They foolishly answered, "We are able."⁸

When Jesus told the twelve that they would abandon him, Peter replied, "I will never fall away." When Jesus then told him he would deny him, Peter doubled down. "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!"⁹

Peter, James, and John don't see the trouble they're in. They don't keep watching and praying, so they fall into the temptations of the devil, the world, and their sinful natures. All of the disciples will abandon Jesus. And Peter will double down once again, this time denying him, just as Jesus foretold.

The portrait of the disciples at Gethsemane brushes in full color a reality of ourselves we're only too eager to look past. We all suffer from self-serving bias, the tendency to credit our successes to our hard work and abilities and to attribute our failures to outside causes. This byproduct of our sinful nature would have us believe that we're not *that* bad, that we're really better than we are. But the picture of the disciples puts that idea straight to bed without any supper.

The temptations we face are no different than those the disciples faced. Luther labels these temptations in the *Small Catechism*, "false belief" and "despair"

False belief is a misplaced confidence or faith in our own abilities. We saw how Peter, James, and John faced this temptation already. We faced this temptation as the coronavirus took hold in America. Then we were tempted to believe that if we just had enough food, hand sanitizer, and toilet paper we would be saved. But in this way we can fail to love our neighbor and so fail to love God. Where one neighbor hoards, another lacks.

⁶ Matthew 26:40-41

⁷ Voelz, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 1061.

⁸ Mark 10:38-39

⁹ Matthew 26:33-35

Despair is to give in to hopelessness. We saw how Judas faced this temptation in our Palm Sunday gospel reading. He confessed his sin to the religious leaders. But when he did not receive the forgiveness he needed, he became hopeless and hanged himself. We face this temptation today every time we pick up our phones, read the paper, or watch the news. Amid the mounting statistics and social media opinions, we can feel all but trapped in our anxiety about the future we face, both tomorrow and on the other side of this pandemic.

We may not respond like Judas, but our instinct is to try harder and do more to pull ourselves out of this despair. And so back and forth we go from overconfidence to despair and back again. Trapped in a cycle that can only be broken by someone not caught in the trap.

The contrasting images of Jesus and the disciples at Gethsemane shows us what we need to see: that the disciples are our example in this story. And we fail as hard as they do. On the other hand, the purpose of this story is far from portraying Jesus as our example in prayer or pointing us to our own piety. Instead, we see what Jeffery Gibbs writes, that, “Jesus is not like us in these verses; rather, Jesus is for us in these verses.”¹⁰

At the start of this story, we were uncomfortable, even troubled by the Jesus we saw. But now, our hope builds. We see that Jesus felt temptation as we do. As the author of Hebrews writes, “For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”¹¹

Luther wrote in the *Large Catechism*, “To feel temptation is, therefore, a far different thing from consenting or yielding to it.” Jesus’ betrayer arrived, and his final words at Gethsemane show he succeeded where his disciples failed. “Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go.”¹²

He overcame temptation. His will *is* the Father’s will and as the perfect Son, he did it obediently to the point of death, even death on a cross.¹³ He walked head on into his suffering and death. All for us. As Pastor Ken said in his sermon on Palm Sunday, “this is always about us with Jesus.”¹⁴

So go to dark Gethsemane. For there you see that even in his greatest moment of weakness, Jesus is your only source of strength against the temptations you face. As the author of Hebrews also writes of Jesus, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”¹⁵ There, in Jesus, you see how the weakness of God is stronger than your strength. Where you fail, he succeeds. Where you are obstinate, he is obedient. Where you are sinful, he is righteous.

At Gethsemane, Jesus overcame temptation to take on your sin and punishment, by suffering and dying on the cross. And, in exchange for your sin, he gives you his righteousness and your sins are forgiven. **AMEN.**

¹⁰ Gibbs, *Matthew 21:1-28:20*, 1442

¹¹ Hebrews 2:18

¹² Matthew 26:45-46

¹³ Philippians 2:8

¹⁴ Nelson, *Palm Sunday Message: John 12:12-19*, April 5th, 2020.

¹⁵ Hebrews 4:15