

Many churches on Palm Sunday, will preach on the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, as we read earlier. It's the story of Christ's fulfillment of scripture. It is one of the many ways that Jesus demonstrated and laid claim to his role as the Messiah...and yet, also implicit in that bold act, was a show of humility, and the upside-down nature of God's Kingdom. Not entering in as a conquering King riding on a war horse, as Caesar would have done, Christ rode in a donkey draft animal as a symbol of peace.

As we wrap up our series Dangerous Prayer, I want to fast forward, from that scene at the beginning of holy week, almost to the end - to the night that Jesus was betrayed. This morning we're going to look at the prayer Jesus prayed on the eve of the crucifixion as he struggled in the Garden of Gethsemane staring down the torment that awaited...As we prepare to look back on that night, I also want to extend an invitation to join us this Friday evening for our Good Friday service. As I said, today we're looking at Jesus' prayer in the Garden - on Friday evening we will look to Jesus' prayer on the cross, specifically the prayer taken from Psalm 22: "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" I hope that you'll consider joining us, as we worship and wrestle with the words of that prayer, and what Christ's death by crucifixion means for you and for me.

But, let's not get ahead of ourselves. Would you join me in the gospel of Matthew chapter twenty-six. Beginning with verse thirty-five.

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray."³⁷ He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled.³⁸ Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."³⁹

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."⁴⁰ Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter.⁴¹ "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

⁴² He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

⁴³ When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy.⁴⁴ So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

⁴⁵ Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners.

The gospel writers Matthew, Mark and Luke, all include Jesus' prayer in the Garden. In John's gospel, he doesn't include the details of the prayer, but he, like the three, places Jesus with his disciples in the garden on the night he was arrested. What's interesting about what transpires in the Garden is the uncertainty the prayer appears to introduce in Jesus. Throughout Jesus' ministry, it seems rather clear that he understood his role. He knew his purpose. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus predicted his death on three different occasions. Shortly after the third prediction, he gives an interpretation for the meaning of his death, he says ***"just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*** We'll talk about this as we dig deeper into this text, and particularly as we look to the cross on Friday night, but by Jesus freely giving his life, those of us who trust in him are set free

from our slavery to sin. Jesus knew that this is what he came for. In Matthew 26. In the house of Simon the Leper, a woman anointed his feet with expensive perfume. The disciples grumbled about the wastefulness of the act and Jesus told those looking on, ***“When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial.”*** At the last supper he foreshadows his death in talking about his body broken and blood poured out. And on the walk from dinner to the garden, Jesus was already making plans for what would transpire after his resurrection. Is that evidence that he was confident in the plan? I would say so.

Then why the prayer? Or the three prayers? Why is it that Jesus, so confident in one moment, is all the sudden looking for another way out? It’s not like Jesus all the sudden this as new information or some breaking news, is it? Hasn’t this been the plan all along. But our text tells us, that ***“he began to be sorrowful and troubled.”*** When Jesus began to pray in the garden, something new hit him. In Mark’s telling of the story, the Greek word he uses actually means “amazed” or “astonished” at something in the garden. Likewise the word for sorrow, is a really intense word. Combined with the word troubled, some interpreters, have chosen to translate it as “horrified.” He was astonished and horrified as he went to prayer.

In the following verse, Jesus says ***“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.”*** I think that in our culture, it’s easy to overlook this statement. Many of us are given to hyperbole. We say things like “that movie was so bad it was literally torture.” Or if we miss lunch, we say we complain that we’re “starving” or after an embarrassing moment, I thought I was going to die. I don’t think Jesus was exaggerating for effect.

I wish it wasn’t the case, but I know there are some of you here, have tasted a bit of what Jesus was experiencing. Where you have had something happen in your life, something so painful, that in that moment you could not imagine how you were going to go on. Perhaps it was a phone call that you received, an unexpected knock at the door, or conversation at the dinner table. And that moment it casts a shadow over the remainder of your life. It’s become a dividing line of sorts. Everything is either before or it is after. I hope you can take some comfort that Jesus understands everything that you have been through. In that moment of desperation and sorrow. Jesus was there. He knows.

Some people are disturbed or at least confused with Jesus’ actions in the Garden, in that almost totally overcome with grief. As he left Peter, James and John to pray to the Father, he literally collapsed to the ground, too weak to stand. And then he prays...God is there another way we can do this?

What’s disturbing, is when you compare Jesus’ response to that of his early followers, Jesus, the Messiah doesn’t compare that well. Think about the witness of Stephen in the book of Acts, who with total composure is stoned to death by members of the Sanhedrin. He looks up to heaven calmly, and said “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,” and then he goes on “do not hold their sins against them.” The Apostle Paul faced death on multiple occasions but did so with boldness as have Christian martyrs throughout history. One of best quotes comes from a British Clergyman named Hugh Latimer who was burnt at the stake for his faith in the 16th century. Just before they were martyred, he said to his friend Nicholas Ridgley who was with him ***“Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man! We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.”*** That’s the way to go isn’t it.

So...what’s with Jesus? If you’ve got your bibles open, look at what he’s praying about. What is it that Jesus really want to avoid? In verses, thirty-nine and forty-two, and forty-four

tells us he prayed the same thing gain. Jesus is talking about a cup he was to drink. Is there any way I can do this Father without drinking the cup? The cup alludes to what will happen at the cross, it includes the cross, however the cup Jesus is to drink metaphorically speaking is not the cross alone. The concept of the cup comes from the Old Testament, and it is generally understood to be the cup of God's wrath. Take a look at Psalm 75:8 **"In the hand of the LORD is a cup full of foaming wine mixed with spices; he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs."** The concept of the cup comes from a practice in ancient times, where often executions were performed by drinking poison so toxic that it would corrode your insides and kill you. The most famous of these was Socrates drinking hemlock.

As the Psalm directs us, it represents God's divine judgement on sinfulness and wickedness in this world. The cup of God's wrath was meant for us. I know this is the 21st century we don't like to think about God's wrath, we like to imagine a loving God, but a loving God is also a wrathful God. Because when something or someone God loves is attacked, defaced, or destroyed, there must be justice. It must be made right. It would be a loveless God who fails intervene and act on behalf of the one he loves. Even in us, he hates the sins that pollute and corrupt our lives. And he will not sit by, without acting on behalf of those he loves against whatever harms them, even if it's our own selves. That's what God's wrath does, it is not the opposite of love it is just the other side of love.

And God gives his son, and we will see, Jesus freely gives himself to become the object of wrath to drink the cup to the bottom, as the ultimate act of his love so we don't have to. In 2 Corinthians **"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."** This is the good news, we don't have to drink the cup that is rightfully ours, through Christ God's justice prevails and we have been restored.

This is why Jesus' experience is so different than that of other Christian martyrs. They may have faced death, what Christ faced was death, gruesome indeed, but he also took on the burden for all the sin and evil in this world. 1 John 2:2 tells us **"He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."** That's not to take the universalist position and say everyone has been saved, because we know not everyone has accepted the gift, but he did take on all sin and die for all. In doing so, he became the focal point for all of God's anger and wrath against sin.

Christ knew that this was his mission, but in the Garden of Gethsemane, he began to experience it. One further thing that sets Christ's experience apart from other martyrs is that they're given the comfort of God's power and presence in their suffering. It's the Holy Spirit that enables us to persevere in suffering. In taking on our sins, He was denied the very presence that he had enjoyed throughout eternity. As he went to prayer, to take comfort in the Father for the first time in all eternity, God was not there. The commentator William Lane, has this to say about the Garden **"Jesus came to be with the Father for an interlude before his betrayal, but found hell rather than heaven opened before him, and he staggered."**

The reason some conclude that this experience begins here in the Garden, rather than at the trial before the Sanhedrin, or as he was whipped, or even on the cross itself is because God is giving Jesus a choice. In his humanity Jesus was to have a choice to undergo what was before him or not. It seems God wanted this choice to be made in the full knowledge, the clearest picture of what the sacrifice would entail and it would entail doing so alone.

That's what makes Jesus' prayer so profound. In his humanity, with full honesty, again and again, he says I don't want to do this. Not my will, but thine. Father, I want you want. He surrenders, and says lead on.

I don't know if there's ever been a more dangerous prayer prayed in all of history. Think about it. Is there a more terrible consequence for a prayer than what fell upon Jesus? I don't think so. The cross was the answer to his prayer. Not my, will but yours. And he follows through. When we pray God to lead me, we are surrendering our choice, our preference we're saying your will be done. Not mine. I'll follow you where you want me to go, I'll do what you want me to do, I'll say what you want me to say. Jesus models here in the garden what he taught us to beginning of the Lord's prayer ***"your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."*** That prayer, our memory verse this week is an invitation for God to lead us.

And if it hasn't occurred to you yet looking at Jesus' example, let me make it explicit. **God's leadership is costly.** It's costly, to pray God lead me. I want your will not mine.

Let me be crystal clear, Jesus paid the ultimate price, so that you and I would never have to. If you put your trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, your debt has been paid in full. But if you look through God's word, at the example of men and women faithfully following God's leadership – it is nothing if not costly. Abraham and Sarah had to leave their home and their family, Daniel was thrown into the lion's den, Esther risked her life to speak up to the King, not to mention what happened to the prophets and that's barely scratching the surface. We haven't even got to the New Testament. Perhaps nothing more need be said then Jesus' words ***"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."***²⁵ ***For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it."***

The costly nature of God's leadership can lead to the second reason that this prayer is so dangerous and that's sometimes **God's leadership can be confusing.** Jesus told the disciples again and again that he would be killed and rise again, and the disciples didn't get it until after he rose from the grave. Thomas had to get up close and personal to get it. Or let's go back to the Old Testament, imagine you're one of the Israelites you've just escaped from Egypt, and God leads you to the edge of the Red Sea to encamp, where Pharaoh and the Egyptian army have you pinned down. Don't you think that God's leadership there would have been confusing? Of course it was. The Israelites cried out to Moses ***"Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us out to the desert to die?"*** God himself says ***"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD.***⁹ ***"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."*** When God leads us, it is not always going to make sense to us. Which is why we follow Jesus' example in this passage, and bring our confusion and questions before God and ask him? It's why we search scripture, because his word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path, when the way seems unclear. We rely on the wisdom of brothers and sisters in Christ to give us counsel. But even when we work our way through the process...we might still be left with nothing but an invitation to trust and follow and his lead.

My guess is that if I left you with these first two points, none of you would be that interested in praying "God lead me." But for me, this week, studying what Jesus experienced in the Garden, on the way to the cross. How he stared into the abyss, and all that was ahead of him. When I think of the agony that staggered him, and the anguish of what God the Father

must have gone through to allow his beloved son to drink the cup. You know what I kept thinking, “What incredible love? What unfailing, unquestionable love?” Nothing could make God’s love for us more clear, or more real. That God would stop at nothing, to draw us back to himself. I will surrender to his leadership, I will surrender to his will because God is for us in a manner that words fail to express. He is for you. The third lesson of the garden is the lesson that Adam and Eve missed in the first garden. **God’s leadership is trustworthy.** You can pray God lead me, because he is trustworthy. If he did not withhold his own son, he will hold nothing back. God’s will for you, is the direct expression of his love for you. It may be costly, at times it may be confusing, but you can trust Him in the face of all, because you can trust in his love for you.