

“Not What I Want, but What You Want”

March 29, 2026 – Palm Sunday

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Matthew 26:36-46 (NRSVUE)

³⁶ Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” ³⁷ He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee and began to be grieved and agitated. ³⁸ Then he said to them, “My soul is deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” ³⁹ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want but what you want.” ⁴⁰ Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, “So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? ⁴¹ Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” ⁴² Again he went away for the second time and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” ⁴³ Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴ So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. ⁴⁵ Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Now the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ Get up, let us be going. Look, my betrayer is at hand.”

Throughout the season of Lent, we have journeyed with the Israelites in the wilderness: crossing the sea when it appeared they were trapped, receiving manna from heaven and water from a rock when their provisions ran out, entering into covenant with God when they had no unifying identity, called out of their everyday tedium to extraordinary relationship with the divine through worship. At every point on their wilderness journey, God was there – as a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, providing just what they needed just when they needed it. From their fears and hopes, their successes and failures, their fickleness and their faithfulness, we have seen in their journey *our* journey, too.

Our Lenten journey began, though, in a different wilderness with Jesus as he faced temptation and overcame it. We followed along with a journey that would take him from the Galilee through Samaria and to Jerusalem. We waved palm branches and shouted, “Hosanna!” as he entered Jerusalem as the true Messiah. That journey will soon lead through the Temple court to an upper room with the disciples and all the way to the cross. We pause this morning to kneel with him in the garden on the eve of his Passion, the cusp of events that will change the course of human history.

It wasn’t so much to ask. “Stay awake with me.” But the disciples were exhausted. It had been a long week and an emotional day. They could not have known what would soon happen. They didn’t know how little time they had left with Jesus. All they knew was that he was deeply troubled and needed to pray. They promised to keep watch with him, but their eyes were heavy, their bodies tired. And Jesus went away by himself for a long time. The spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak.

They did not see his agony as he prayed, how he threw himself to the ground, collapsing under the weight of all he had to bear. They did not hear the urgency in his voice. They did not comprehend his final temptation: to turn aside in the final stage of his journey.

“Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” *Is this suffering I am about to face truly necessary? Must I die this way? Isn't there some other way to do what must be done?* Even now, even as the guards were marching toward Gethsemane, Jesus could have walked away, disappeared into the night, and fled to the wilderness. But as he prayed, his spirit took its own journey. His resolve was steeled. “Not what I want, but what you want.”

He returned to find Peter, James, and John sound asleep. “Could you not stay awake with me for an hour?” We often criticize the disciples for their weakness in this moment. But is that fair? Who among us could have stayed awake – late at night, in a garden, by ourselves, while Jesus went away to pray *for an hour*. We think, “They should have been praying, too.” Maybe they were. Can you pray for an hour? In the middle of the night? I struggle with praying for a fraction of that time. Anything more than ten minutes, I need an outline or at least a list. I have no illusion that I could do better. But these are the people Jesus trusted to carry on his ministry. Peter had been given the keys to the kingdom. James and John wanted to sit next to Jesus when he ascended to the throne. And all Jesus asked of them was to take the first watch.

Again he went away to pray – still distressed, yet resolute. “If this cup cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” He returned to the disciples again. They were asleep, *again*. This time he didn't even bother to wake them. He just went back to praying, much in the same way as before. The minutes passed, relentlessly ticking toward the suffering that awaited. Yet he stayed the course. “Not what I want, but what you want.”

As we reflect on this scene from Jesus's final week, I hope we can feel the weight of his agony and see more clearly his extraordinary faithfulness. I hope that we can cut the disciples some slack and empathize with the fear and despair that drove them into the shadows until the day of Pentecost. And I hope that we can come to better understand the power and the purpose of prayer, and how Jesus's prayer in the garden can guide us when we find ourselves on wilderness journeys of our own in life.

If we pay close attention to what Jesus prayed, we note that he does not begin in a place of certainty. He does not stoically accept the fate that awaits him. His words convey distress, fear, and desperation. He was so troubled that he felt as if he might die of anxiety right there in the garden. In that moment, Jesus would have given anything to avoid the ordeal he was about to face. This is Jesus at his most human, responding as any of us would if facing the prospect of terrible suffering and death. He is honest. He is vulnerable. He protests. He mourns. He begs for a way out of this. He bares his soul and questions his path. But he stays in the conversation until he has the clarity and the strength he needs to continue on.

When and how do you pray? Does prayer come naturally? Or is prayer an obligation, a requirement to keep you in compliance with God's expectations? Is it composed of a series of well-rehearsed phrases, couched in “churchy” language that sounds like it was ripped from the pages of one of Paul's letters? Is prayer for you a wish list of things you'd like God to do for you or your family or your friends, if it wouldn't be too much trouble? Is it a measure of last resort, an option to be exercised only after all other alternatives have been exhausted?

Perhaps the raw honesty Jesus exhibited in his prayer in the garden is an encouragement for us to do the same. We can trust God to hear us at our most desperate, frustrated, angry, fearful, despairing, in our hollowed-out moments, because God wants us to be real in our prayers. After all, we can't hide what we really feel from God and pretend to be something we're not. God isn't fooled. God knows us better than we know ourselves.

But our prayers shouldn't stop there. We should lay it all out there to God, but expect God to have something to say to us in return. There is a reason Jesus took so long when he went away to pray. It wasn't a one-way message, an airing of grievances, a request or a demand to be met; it was a *conversation*. And prayer changed him; it can change us, too, if we let it.

I think what Matthew gives us in this passage is a kind of *Cliff's Notes* version of the prayer. I don't think it went from "Let this cup pass from me" to "not what I want, but what you want" in a single breath. In the time it took the disciples to drift into deep sleep, Jesus worked through some things with God. And it took him three rounds of wrestling with God to be ready to face what was about to come. Prayer prepared him and sustained him through it all. The prayer that began in the garden continued to the temple court to Pilate's palace to the climb toward Golgotha. A prayer was on his lips on the cross even as he breathed his last.

Prayer is not about telling God what we need, as though God doesn't already know. Prayer isn't a test of our faith to see if we'll use just the right words or be sincere enough for God to answer in the way we want. Prayer is a *conversation*, a time for sharing honestly and listening to what God is saying to us. Prayer is how we grow in relationship to God. And through prayer, God transforms us to become what we did not even know we could. *Prayer changes us.*

I don't know what this week will hold for you. What I *do* know is this: some of us will struggle with chronic pain. Some of us will worry about money. Some of us will have our hearts broken. Some of us will get angry with our children. Some of us will experience the death of a loved one. Some of us – maybe all of us – will be anxious about what tomorrow may bring.

This week, as we journey with Christ toward the cross, remember his prayer in the garden. Remember him at his most vulnerable, his most human. And remember that if Jesus could pray that way to God, so can you. We will not share in his suffering, but we can locate our own suffering in his story, and we can learn from him how to pray more sincerely. Let this be a time in our lives that prayer becomes a more honest, intimate, and heartfelt practice.

And remember this: everything Christ endured, he did for us. God wants to be close to us so much that God became one of us, suffered with us and for us, died an excruciating death, and rose triumphantly for our sake. All of that happened in the span of a week, the week we are about to remember through worship and story and prayer. Pray with Christ through this week, and let God transform you through prayer to become more fully who God made you to be. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

