

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
April 5, 2020
Entering the Passion of Jesus: Picturing Ourselves in the Story
Lent 6: Gethsemane: Risking Temptationⁱ
Scripture: Matthew 21:1-11 (Palms)
Mark 14:32-42

It's really strange to be sitting at home and preaching a sermon. I've never done that before but then again, we are in a time that most of us have never seen before. Typically, at this time of year, this Sunday we would be celebrating Palm Sunday with children and adults waving palm branches and shouting Hosanna.

We always face the temptation of wanting to move directly from the celebration of Palm Sunday to the celebration of Easter when our church would be filled with brightly colored plants and we would gather with family and friends for meals. Children would be collecting Easter Eggs and I know that some children were happy when Governor Raimondo answered a child's question this week by saying that the Easter Bunny is an essential worker.

But no matter how we look at it, Easter will be different this year. Especially this year, it is impossible to get to Easter without going through Holy Week. Holy Week sounds remarkably like our current world. It was a time when everything was turned upside down, when questions were asked, when confusion reigned, when fear was rampant, and when sorrow was prevalent.

This year, Easter may look a lot more like that first Easter than we imagined. Because I think that the events of Holy Week speak to us especially today, I want to focus on one particular event. Let's look at

Thursday night when Jesus went with his disciples to the garden of Gethsemane and went off by himself to pray.

You just heard Taylor playing out what one of the disciples might have been saying and thinking that night. Although these monologues from Marcia McFee's Worship Design Studio, were written some time ago, the words are amazingly relevant today. Did you hear him say, "Maybe I'm so sleepy because I'm just so very tired. This week is taking its toll on me. Watching our every step, wondering when the other shoe will drop..."

Do you feel like that? I do. We may not be "watching our every step" but we certainly are "washing everything we touch" and the week or weeks are taking their toll on many of us. Whether or not, we acknowledge it, many are on edge, and living that way, is simply exhausting, especially mentally and emotionally.

Jesus had been living in that way. He knew he was being carefully watched. He knew that he was about to die. People had tried to trick him with tough questions that would have either gotten him arrested or caused his followers to walk away.

Jesus was and is the son of God. But a basic tenet of our faith is that he was also fully human and fully human people become exhausted by the kind of week he had and the kind of week or weeks each of us have had. If you are feeling exhausted, it's okay.

Maybe our fatigue at dealing with staying at home or working under what are far from normal circumstances can help us be a little more forgiving of the disciples who couldn't stay awake in the garden that night. Maybe it can help us be a little more patient and understanding of others who are feeling the effects of a complete change in the way we do everything.

It's tempting to chastise ourselves for feeling exhausted and compare ourselves to others. It's tempting to try to minimize what we are feeling and I want to encourage you not to do that. Be honest with yourself and when possible with others about what you are feeling.

Amy Jill Levine wrote a Lenten study book called Entering the Passion of Jesus. Some of us have been using this as a study during Lent and in many respects, what she has to say has also influenced much of what I have shared over the last few weeks and certainly does today.

She points out that in the garden that night, Jesus prayed for himself. Jesus didn't want to die. He would have preferred to live; and he prayed for himself. Sometimes we think we should only be praying for others, but that is just not the case. We certainly should be praying for others, but Jesus' tradition and ours includes the importance of personal prayer.

From the cross, Jesus would utter the words of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That is a very personal prayer and it is one that people may be praying right now. The familiar 23rd Psalm is a personal prayer. Throughout scripture we hear over and over again of people praying for themselves. Job and Jeremiah are only two examples.

Levine says, "We need personal prayer – to sustain us, to help us find courage, to lament. Jesus provides the example that in cases of extreme concern, of course, we pray for ourselves."ⁱⁱ

That night in the garden, things took on a life of their own. Up until that time, Jesus could have run away. He could have gone into hiding. The One who had healed many and fed thousands could probably have changed things somehow. He could have fought what was happening. He could have bargained with God.

In the garden that night, Jesus prayed that if it were possible that he wouldn't have to die. At the same time, he prayed that what was most important was not what he wanted but what was needed, what was necessary under those circumstances.

Sixteen years ago, when Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ" came out, I had a conversation with a colleague who asked me if I believed that Jesus had to die. It was one of those difficult questions because the movie, as I recall, made it appear that Jesus' death was pre-ordained, that there was no other way.

At the time, I thought and still think, that yes, Jesus had to die, not because God demanded his death, but because continuing to be who he was demanded it. Could he have run away? Yes, I believe so. Could he have gone into hiding? Yes. He could have encouraged his disciples to fight to defend his life. He could have asked God to send angels to protect him. But if he had, wouldn't that have contradicted everything he had been preaching and teaching? Wouldn't it have made him into someone different than he was?

Remember at the beginning of his ministry, right after he was baptized, he went into the wilderness for forty days and was tempted there. Levine reminds us that he was tempted to use his miraculous powers for his own benefit. Instead of turning stones into bread to feed himself, he presents his body as bread for the world. Instead of throwing himself off the Temple so that the angels would catch him, he allows his body to be broken on the cross. Instead of worshipping Satan and gaining power over the kingdoms of the world, he refused and proclaimed that we are to worship and serve only God. Now it is Jesus who is worshipped.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus didn't want to die. Wouldn't it have been wonderful, if the world had responded differently to him? But at that point, there was no other option than dying and trusting God. We know where that trust led. That trust led to the greatest upside-down surprise ever. Death did not have the victory, God did, life did!

But that's looking ahead, isn't it and that's something that I am grateful that we are able to do. That looking ahead, that promise, that remembering what happened on Easter helps us face what is happening on the days that feel like Friday, when there seems to be no hope.

Levine points out that "I don't want to die' is a very good prayer."^{iv} It's prayed by firefighters, police, members of the military. It is prayed by doctors, nurses, CNAs, respiratory therapists, cleaning and kitchen staff, anyone working in a hospital, nursing home, or medical facility today dealing with those infected with COVID-19.

Today it is also prayed by grocery store clerks, truck drivers making deliveries, anyone receiving a package at home, anyone going into a grocery store buying food and necessary supplies. In fact, today, it is being prayed by all of us, isn't it?

There is also a second part to that prayer for us, just as there was for Jesus. Those in danger because of their employment are likely praying, "I don't want to do this, but I know this is my vocation or my job. This is what I have to do." They do have an option. They could stay home. They could run away and hide, but there are consequences to our decisions.

And those consequences mean that for many there really is no choice. If medical people don't go to work, even more people will die. If grocery clerks and truck drivers don't show up at work, there will be no food

or necessary supplies for any of us. I have become more aware of the many different kinds of work that people do that is so essential.

There are some who are finding themselves bored with nothing to do. But many others find themselves busier than they have ever been; trying to learn how to fulfill their responsibilities in different ways, sometimes while trying to learn how to use new kinds of technology.

When we do the things we know we have to do, even when we don't want to, even when they are more dangerous for us now than they were only a few weeks ago, that's Gethsemane. The question of Lent and the question for today are the same. "What do we need to do?" Not what do we want to do? Not what would we like to do? Not what should we do, or could we do? The question is "What do we need to do?" Who is depending upon us? What is absolutely essential for us to do?

In our lives there will always be times when we will fail to do what we think we should do, or what someone else tells us we should do. The disciples failed to stay awake despite Jesus asking them to do so three different times. But what happened? Jesus was disappointed – no doubt about that. But he did not reject them. He forgave them. He understood. He did not send them away. In fact, all of his disciples ran away when Jesus was arrested and yet, Jesus came to them on Easter, forgiving them and sending them out into the world.

And he does the same with us. He does not send us away or reject us. When we fail, the good news is that we have a God of second chances – and quite frankly, a God of third, fourth and fifth chances. And for us, that is most definitely good news!

There is one last thing I want to mention from Mark's account. He tells us about a young man who ran away naked. We have no idea who he

was. I like Levine's speculation here. She suggests that he is Mark's reader "fearful, naked, risking arrest himself, about to face the death of Jesus, and unable to do anything about it."^v In other words, he is us.

I think he's a good image for us today. We cannot stop this COVID-19 in any of the normal ways we have stopped things before. We may want to run as fast and as far as we can – but running will not help us. We believe that staying at home will help us and others. We are not stuck at home; we are safe at home. Running away only puts us and other people at more risk. Staying keeps all of us safer. We can be pretty sure that things will get worse before they get better, but this will come to an end and there will be a new time, new life, a new way of doing things and being together.

The message of Lent reminds us that we are not alone, and that Jesus understands what we are feeling and experiencing and that he has felt these things as well. The message of Easter reminds us that out of death, and sadness, and fear, and grief, comes new life. That, my friends, is a message that I believe we can and must hold on to.

We cannot go from Palm Sunday directly to Easter. We have to pass through Holy Week. We have to pass through the todays and tomorrows so that we can come to Easter, to God's promise of new life.

Steve Garnaas-Holmes is a pastor in the New England Conference. His daily meditations in "Unfolding Light" often speak to me. His prayer from Friday of this week, spoke to me, and I want to share it with you as our prayer.

"Now we are beginning to understand we are one body.

We are all dependent and intertwined with so many even far away.

A stranger's hand-washing is my health, a worker's delivery is my life.

The well-being of my neighbor is my well-being.

I love my neighbor as myself – not just as much as myself but as the rest of myself.

“Blessed Oneness, Divine Wholeness, bless our unity, that in it as readily as we spread disease, we may spread love.

Give us compassion to care for the least, for what we do to them, we do to you, and to ourselves.

May we trust the global impact of our individual actions.

May your one Spirit bring together our one humanity.

You who are the One, may we be one.

Bless our one, holy, ailing body with your mercy and your grace.^{vi}

Amen.

We remember that so often we do fail at what we think we should or could do, and at what God asks us to do. Accepting the power and the promise of forgiveness and new life, let us join in our prayer of confession.

ⁱ This sermon includes ideas from Amy-Jill Levine [Entering the Passion of Jesus](#). The sermon title is from the Worship Design Studio Lenten Series.

ⁱⁱ Levine, Amy-Jill [Entering the Passion of Jesus](#) p.133

ⁱⁱⁱ Levine, p.134

^{iv} Ibid, p. 133

^v Ibid, p.139

^{vi} Garnass-Holmes, Steve. “Unfolding Light” Meditation for April 3, 2020, based on I Corinthians 12:15