

We are starting a new sermon series today for this season of Lent—the season in the Christian calendar where we lead up to Holy Week. We spend six weeks focusing specifically on the journey of suffering for Jesus in order to prepare our hearts and minds to more deeply grasp the cross of Christ and His resurrection on Easter morning.

And so to do that this year, we're looking at passages in Matthew 26-27, starting from the moment that Jesus steps foot into the garden of Gethsemane.

Because from this moment on, after He's eaten His last meal with His disciples—famously called the 'last supper'—after He has spent three years trying to prepare His disciples for what the 'end' will look like, after He has tried numerous times to rearrange their assumptions about who He is and what He has come to do...

*Now*, here in the garden of Gethsemane, a major shift occurs and Jesus is no longer focused on preparing His disciples and trying to shift His disciples' perceptions to *understand* that He is a suffering Messiah.

*Now* is the moment when Jesus *is* the suffering Messiah. Where He needs to shift His head and heart to what's in front of Him. On what church history has often referred to as the 'passion' of Jesus, which comes from the Latin word *passio*, meaning to endure or suffer.

From the moment that Jesus leaves the upper room and leads His disciples to Gethsemane, He turns His attention towards what He will now need to endure. What He will need to suffer.

### **Read Matthew 26:36-46.**

This past week, we had an Ash Wednesday service here at the church. And so I drove home—of course—with this black cross on my forehead (and Pastor Martin had gotten me real good—it was thick). And when I walked in the door, Malakai—my three year old—came bounding around the corner, yelling 'Mommy, Mommy!' and then stopped dead in his tracks.

Why? Because something was noticeably different. Something that made him nervous, actually.

Here in the garden of Gethsemane is the moment when the disciples would have noticed that something was different, and would have appropriately begun to get nervous.

It's not that they hadn't been there before. Gethsemane was a garden on the Mount of Olives, a mountain where Jesus spent a good deal of time with his disciples. But only here in this scene is this garden ever mentioned. They went to Mount of Olives regularly, but the gospel writers never mention the garden until now.

In other words, this garden has a specific purpose. Jesus enters the garden with his disciples, and he says to them, *“Sit here while I go over there and pray.”*

Now, if you’re familiar with the gospels, you’ll know that it was a regular occurrence for Jesus to go away and pray on his own—and often before a big event or decision needed to be made.

Mark 1:35 – *“Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.”* And the next thing that happens is that Jesus begins to preach and heal.

In Matthew 14:13, after hearing that John the Baptist had been killed, *“...[Jesus] withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.”* And the next thing that happens is that Jesus feeds the 5000.

Shortly after in Matthew 14:23 – *“After he had dismissed them [the crowd], he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.”* And the next thing that happens is that Jesus walks on water.

In Luke 6:12, Jesus spends an entire night praying to God on a mountain, and when morning comes, the next thing that happens is that Jesus selects His twelve apostles.

According to Luke 5:16, *“Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.”* He needed constant filling and empowering and direction from the Father. He *depended* on prayer to do the things he was doing.

And so here in the garden of Gethsemane, it shouldn’t surprise us that Jesus wants to go to a solitary place to pray. This should alert us that something big is about to happen. Something for which Jesus *needs* His Father’s guiding hand and Spirit.

But already in these early verses, we get a clue that something is different this time.

Why? Because Jesus doesn’t go alone. He takes Peter, James, and John with him, the three disciples who we know were Jesus’ closest companions—or at least the ones who would play pivotal roles going forward.

How do we know this? Because there were three very distinct and pivotal times when Jesus separated these three out.

When he raised Jairus’ daughter. Jairus was a synagogue leader and had come to Jesus begging him to heal his dying daughter. But by the time Jesus got there, the girl had already died. But Jesus took the three disciples in with Him and showed them a demonstration of His power.

Secondly, when Jesus took them to a mountainside to pray, and as he was praying he was transfigured before them. He was completely white; He had Moses and Elijah suddenly standing next to him. He showed them a demonstration of His power. His divinity was on full display.

Now, for the third time, in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus takes these three men aside. He separates them from the group and He shows them—again—a demonstration of His power.

But this time it's different. How? How does He demonstrate His power in this moment? How does He show them His divinity?

With sorrow. Literally, with overwhelming grief. He renders His heart open before them. He shares with them that He's not doing so well.

Verse 38, he says, "*My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.*"

Have you ever paused on that verse for a moment to picture Jesus—your Lord and Saviour—*overwhelmed* with sorrow?

For the first time in His life, Jesus doesn't want to pray alone. He doesn't want to be alone. He desires companionship in His suffering.

And He invites Peter, James, and John to *see* His sorrow, to see and *hear* His deep internal struggle. The mental, emotional, and spiritual suffering that He was experiencing already now—even before His physical suffering.

These three were given a window into the suffering of God. Which instinctively we may think is a bit of an oxymoron. How can a divine being suffer? Maybe Jesus was only fully human in this moment, rather than being God-incarnate.

Because gods don't suffer. Or at least, not in other ancient religions, and still today. The early Christians were actually ridiculed for this. A god who willingly suffers? That's a pretty weak god.

But this reality is at the heart of our faith.

Many of you have perhaps heard of the German Lutheran pastor and theologian named Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He's famously known for his resistance to the Hitler regime during WWII, and for eventually being arrested and executed because of it.

Well, while he was in prison, he wrote letters to a close friend which eventually got turned into a book called "Letters and Papers from Prison."

And in those letters, he speaks profoundly about this idea of a suffering God. In the midst of his own suffering, he writes that Christians should not seek God only in times of personal weakness but rather should seek to be alongside of Him in the center of *the world's* pain.

In other religions, he writes, people search for God as a solution to their problems. Life goes awry, and then God comes in to save them. To fix the problem. It's a god-of-the-gaps idea. God is your personal handyman. You go to your 'god' to get what you need. When I want you I will call you.

But for Bonhoeffer, God wasn't distant from the world's pain and standing outside of it—ready to fly in and help when needed—but was instead One who suffered *with* the world. Who was within it.

Because he wrote this: “Only a suffering God can help.”

In other words, we need to abandon the false notion of the ‘God-who-comes-to-fix-my-personal-problems’ and see instead the God who suffers and grieves *with* the whole world.

Think again of Jesus in the garden. He isn't just observing the darkness from a distance. And He's not avoiding it. He's waiting and watching for it to come. He knows what's coming.

Look at verse 39. Jesus goes a little farther, falls with his face to the ground (the only time we see this happen), and prays, “*My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.*”

This is perhaps where we see Jesus in His greatest moment of fragility. May this cup be taken from me. In other words, Father, I really don't want this.

Why? Because as Henri Nouwen puts it, “Jesus' cup is the cup of sorrow, not just his own sorrow but the sorrow of the *whole human race*. It is a cup full of physical, mental, and spiritual anguish. It is the cup of starvation, torture, loneliness, rejection, abandonment, and immense anguish. It is the cup full of bitterness. Who wants to drink it?”

In the Psalms and prophets, it is the cup of God's wrath. It's the cup of retribution and judgement on the wickedness of the nations. Who, indeed, would ever want to drink it?

Back in Matthew 20, the mother of James and John asks Jesus if her sons could sit at his right and left in his Kingdom. And he says to the men, “*You don't know what you are asking.... Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?*”

Completely naïve, they said yes—thinking that Jesus is speaking of responsibilities in His Kingdom that their brave and courageous gladiator spirits could handle. We'll fight for you Jesus. We'll conquer Rome with you Jesus. We'll do anything for you Jesus.

But they had no idea what Jesus was talking about.

And ironically, it's those same disciples who—when Jesus is anguishing over the cup that He is being asked to drink—it's those same disciples who have *fallen asleep*. Jesus tries to take them with him, but they can't come. Three times Jesus returns to find His friends unable to comfort.

Because this is a path that He must walk entirely alone.

The first trial of Jesus in this journey of suffering is to receive the cup that He is being asked to drink—the cup of consequence, the cup of wrath, the cup that shoulders the weight of the world's evil. To take that cup, and to take it completely alone.

It's why His second and third prayers don't actually push the cup away. *"If it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it,"* he says, *"may your will be done."*

In other words, he knows that it can't be taken away unless *He* drinks it.

You and I? We don't have it in us. *"Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"* No! No one could drink that cup but Jesus. Because only Jesus could fully grasp the ramifications of drinking that cup. Only Jesus could *handle* the ramifications of drinking that cup.

Only Jesus had a heart of compassion big enough to accept and take *on Himself* the ramifications of drinking that cup.

Have you ever taken a moment to consider how much evil and brokenness there is in the world happening right now? This past Wednesday, these were the first five news headlines on the BBC homepage.

"Wave of arrests over killing of French nationalist piles pressure on far left."

"Difficult Russia-Ukraine peace talks end without breakthrough."

"Eight skiers found dead after California avalanche, with one still missing."

"Teenage girls lured into forced sex by gangs in London."

"Climber on trial for leaving girlfriend to die on Austria's highest mountain."

It's overwhelming. And that doesn't even factor in poverty, starvation, the sex trade, homelessness, drug addiction, school shootings—let alone all that has occurred in human history.

But here's the thing: we have a God who grieves every moment of it. Only a suffering God can help. A God whose heart of compassion has never once overlooked a suffering human heart.

And so being familiar with human suffering is not optional for us. Avoidance is just not an option. I know it's overwhelming; but it's what Jesus experienced. Do we not wish to understand this?

Because it's His suffering that makes all the difference. And the extent to which we understand His suffering is the extent to which we understand how much He suffered *for*. How much we seek to *know*—as Paul puts it in Phil. 3—to *know* Christ's suffering will determine how much we understand the weight of what Christ Jesus suffered *for*.

Because here's the other thing: we won't grasp what Jesus did if we don't grasp *why* He needed to do it. Jesus didn't die *only* to atone for the sins of you and I—as mind-boggling as that is in itself.

He suffered for the *world's* sin. Every last bit of it.

And we *need* to understand this. We'll talk about other aspects of suffering in subsequent weeks. But for today, I want us to grasp *this* specifically.

The suffering that Christ experienced—and all the suffering that *we* experience—is a direct result of, a consequence of, the evil that is present in this world. All suffering is a result of evil—but an evil that Jesus defeated on the cross, a victory that we do not yet see in its fullness, but we see signs of it, and we trust that that victory is coming in full.

And His presence with us in our suffering is the greatest evidence of His already-not-yet-still-coming victory. So to engage with the *world's* suffering is imperative to us. Because as Christians we want to see Christ's presence show up in every corner of darkness and suffering.

Because when we see how dark the dark can be, we realize not just the weight that Christ carried, but the light that is necessary to defeat the darkness. A light that can only be Jesus Christ.

This past week I read an article about Alexei Navalny, the Russian opposition leader who for years was involved in exposing corruption in Russia.

The last few years of his life were spent in a Siberian penal colony called IK-3—a place where basic human rights don't exist. And just over a week ago, the UK government and European allies issued a joint statement saying that two years ago when he died, he had actually been killed with poison. And so the Europeans have called for action to be taken against Russia.

But the point of the article was actually to highlight the strength of this man's faith even in the midst of great suffering. Navalny was a very outspoken Christian, and while trapped in this deeply dehumanizing prison, he had taken on a personal project to memorise the Sermon on the Mount. All 111 verses. And not just in Russian, but in English, French and Latin as well.

Somehow he had managed—in an intricate covert operation—to acquire 111 cards that his press secretary had made for him. Each card had the number of the verse on one side, and the text in four languages on the other.

And he wrote this in his autobiography, clearly having been steeped in Jesus' teachings:

“My job is to seek the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and leave it to Jesus and the rest of his family to deal with everything else.... As they say in prison here: *they* will take my punches for me.”

What does it mean to know the sufferings of Jesus? It means to know what Jesus suffered *for*. To see it. To face it. To understand that our own suffering is a result of it.

And then to *confront* it with the victory of Christ.

Because when we grieve, what we are ultimately grieving is that things are not as they should be. When we feel the sting of evil and brokenness, He does too.

And so we meet with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. We weep with Him. We pray with Him. And we face with Him the brokenness of the world, knowing that He already died for it. He has taken the punches. He has drunk the cup.

And He has assured us that a new day is coming when evil will be no more.