

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

2nd Sunday of Lent
Year A

Duane M. Harris

March 12, 2017

Text: Mark 14:26-42

Title: “24 Hours That Changed the World: The Garden of Gethsemane”

During the winds last week, we didn't lose power but we did have a tree uproot and land on our roof on Wednesday. The tree removal company is coming to remove it tomorrow. About this windstorm DTE Energy said it was the largest weather event in its history, cutting power to more than 1,000,000 utility customers. Some of you were part of that number.

That's not the worst of it, though. Power can be turned back on, utilities restored, and roofs repaired. However, Lynn and I received a Facebook message from a friend of ours about two young adults who were killed on Wednesday as they drove their Mini Cooper on M115. A tree blew over and landed on their car. The young man in the car had been a neighbor of theirs. His parents still are. He was 20. His fiancé was 23. It was a bizarre, serendipitous loss for which there is no explanation.

Sometimes the winds of life are cruel and they deliver a harsh blow.

The life threatening winds of betrayal were blowing the night of Jesus' Last Supper as we hear in the Gospel According to Mark. The scripture reading this morning will invite you to sing a response between the readings, so please be prepared to sing along:

26 [After the supper was over] When [Jesus and the disciples] had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. 27 And Jesus said to them, “You will all become deserters; for it is written,

‘I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep will be scattered.’

28 But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” 29 Peter said to him, “Even though all become deserters, I will not.” 30 Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.” 31 But he said vehemently, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And all of them said the same. 32 They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.”

ALL SING:
**Stay with me,
remain here with me,
watch and pray,
watch and pray.**

SING HYMN

Stay with Me #2198
Copyright © 2000 by Abingdon Press

33 He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. 34 And he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.” 35 And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. 36 He said, “Abba,[a] Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” 37 He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? 38 Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial;[b] the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

ALL SING:
**Stay with me,
remain here with me,
watch and pray,
watch and pray.**

SING HYMN

Stay with Me #2198
Copyright © 2000 by Abingdon Press

39 And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. 40 And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. 41 He came a third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. 42 Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

ALL SING:
**Stay with me,
remain here with me,
watch and pray,
watch and pray.**

SING HYMN

Stay with Me #2198
Copyright © 2000 by Abingdon Press

I would rather not talk about the agony of Gethsemane today. I'd rather talk about the parade as Jesus came into Jerusalem on a colt and was praised with shouts of “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” I'd rather imagine this joyful gathering of a crowd celebrating the promise of Jesus' and feel the excitement of people cheering and waving branches and getting a glimpse of the hero savior named Jesus. It would be a far more pleasant message to hear of God's presence in the parade among the people who love and adore him and want to do everything possible to love and support him.

I could share the story of the man whose son Jesus touched and gave life who could have

been there waving the branches they'd cut off a tree or the woman who'd been bleeding for years who touched his robe and received healing who also stood alongside the road waving and cheering as he passed by. Or we could have recalled the people he fed on a hillside with 5 loaves and 2 fish. Blind Bartimaeus of Jericho could have been there, too, no longer begging by the roadside but now celebrating not only the arrival of Jesus and the promise he holds but seeing the crowd with their green palm branches waving in the air and the contrasting green on the gray stones as some laid branches on the ground before him. Or perhaps the deaf man who was given hearing could be seen there listening with fresh ears to the cheers of the crowd and the Jesus-blessed-joyful children wondering what was happening but joining nonetheless in the revelry. Maybe we could see the man with the withered hand wielding a knife as he cuts palm branches from the field for any who wanted to join in the welcoming of the One who comes in the name of the Lord. The Gerasene Demoniac now in his right mind thanks to Jesus' healing might be there, too, with his family and friends who all were grateful for the gift of this man on the colt as they laid down their colorful coats and shout "Hosanna!". I'd rather talk about the parade of celebration.

But that's not the whole story is it? Sometimes the winds of life become intensely unpredictable, and Jesus' is aware of this. He knows according to the last meal he has with his disciples that his time is limited, that he will be faced not with a parade of cheering fans but with a posse of angry accusers ready to string him up. He knows that anger and fear can change the character of people in a flash and that can be dangerous. So I'd rather not talk about this episode of Jesus' time in Gethsemane, but the Bible—and Jesus—will not allow us to skip over it.

Jesus knows that those closest to him cannot and will not ultimately provide him with what is needed, so Mark says they sang a hymn together after supper and made their way outside the city about a 25 minute walk to the Mt. of Olives to a place called Gethsemane which means "oil press". He is going there to ask God to free him from what he fears will happen to him. He is going there to connect with the only One who can ultimately give him the strength he needs, the answer he wants, the wisdom and the courage required.

ON their walk, he exposes the huge gulf between God and human beings as he informs his friends that very shortly all of them will abandon him. Yet, beyond this abandonment he knows is coming, there is Jesus' promise to meet them later: "I will go before you to Galilee." And of course, impetuous Peter makes his famous stand denying that he will deny Jesus. Peter, however--who may feel secure in considering himself different from everyone else--is the one who will fall the farthest: "Two crows & three times!" Jesus tells him.

It's not just Judas who betrays him, though. In spite of Peter's well-intentioned bravado and the concurrence of the others around him, the whole community abandons Jesus as Jesus alone expresses his complete commitment to God's kingdom way. Peter is blind--and the disciples with him--to the way in which Jesus' allegiance to God's Kingdom drives a wedge between him and all persons.

One of our New Testament professors in seminary surprised me when he said once that he could not sing the hymn "Are Ye Able?" whenever it was part of worship:

"Are ye able," said the Master,
"to be crucified with me?"
"Yea," the sturdy dreamers answered,

"to the death we follow thee."
Lord, we are able. Our spirits are thine.
Remold them, make us, like thee, divine.
Thy guiding radiance above us shall be
a beacon to God, to love, and loyalty.

He couldn't sing it, he said, because it wasn't true. He was not able. The disciples were not able. They said they were, thought they were, hoped they would be no doubt, but they weren't-- not at Gethsemane and not in the remaining hours of Jesus' life.

But that is the way with human beings. We tend to deceive ourselves in overrating or underrating ourselves in judging ourselves and the strength of our faith before we experience a situation. As one of the commentators writes: "The only thing that saves him is Jesus' promise". "I WILL GO BEFORE YOU TO GALILEE."

And it's the only thing that saves us when we fail to do the right thing or stand firm against the forces in the world that are not of God. Jesus always goes before us to Galilee because Galilee isn't just a place but it is any time that the Gospel is shared, the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ shared. Jesus always goes before us even when we, too, have been scattered along with the best of disciples.

They reach the place of prayer and Jesus gives them instructions to stay put as he goes off to connect with the only One who can help him now. He takes Peter, James, and John a little farther and tells them to stay awake. But the three hear something more. He goes deeper with them. "Distressed and agitated", Mark writes: "I am deeply grieved, even to death." It could also be interpreted as "So that I would rather be dead" or "I am grieved so great that it almost crushes me."

It makes me think of those parents' grief as they make arrangements for their 20 year old son and his fiancé who were crushed by a tree. This isn't a slight disturbance Jesus is wrestling with here. It's not about changing jobs or careers or going to a different school or even a disagreement with someone you love. This is a matter of life and death and death is no easy opponent.

Jesus is so troubled that the Gospel of Mark says he THREW himself on the ground. What he faces here is not something he wants to do. He is clear that his friends cannot be the strength and support he needs and, therefore, he goes to the only One who can provide what he needs. He asks God to free him from all of it. This is Jesus, the man. Yes, he is the celebrated One who's adoring fans cheered as he rode into Jerusalem. Yes, he possessed authority unlike any other. Yes, he healed and fed and gave sight to the blind and life to the dead. But here in Gethsemane he faced his own suffering and he wanted out: "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me." But God, apparently, is silent or at least silent as far as the Gospel writers are concerned.

Three times Jesus goes back to the disciples and three times he finds them asleep. "The spirit is willing," he tells them, "but the flesh is weak." It's a reminder of Peter's proclamation that he would die with him and the others' agreement but they can't even stay awake in this life and death hour. It's also a foreshadowing of what was about to take place. When faced with the

possibility of their own suffering and the powerful opponent of death, flesh will overtake the spirit in a heartbeat.

Three times he returns to spend time alone with God. The last time apparently, Jesus becomes clear that this is God's will and not his own: "...not what I want but what you want." Jesus becomes resolute as he expresses what absolute trust in the goodness of God looks like. He doesn't pretend he is strong and courageous but confesses his human desire to avoid what lay ahead, and yet the third time he returns to the disciples, he is clear about his purpose. He has come to the place in which he will embody what it means to lose one's life in order to save it and in his case save others, too. Jesus accepts what is coming as the will of God and though he might appear to be at the mercy of his hapless friends and find himself a victim of the anger and hatred of his opponents, he is the One who now moves purposefully and firmly in his absolute reliance upon the power of God.

This is what God's love looks like. It must take the risk of being vulnerable. As C. S. Lewis wrote, "To love is to become vulnerable, to risk suffering. If you want to make sure your heart is not broken, you must give your heart to no one, to nothing. Then, it will not be broken. Indeed it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable." Love requires the willingness to be vulnerable and Jesus in this place of prayer finds himself as vulnerable before death as one can be.

So while I might want to tell you only about the story of the parade, it isn't the whole story is it? The whole story is a story in which we can live and die, knowing that the One who lived also died in order to bring life out of death. In that dying Jesus revealed the power of God's love in ultimate vulnerability. And though we may be more like the fumbling, well-intentioned disciples than we care to admit, this vulnerable love of Jesus carries a promise, the promise to go before us to places you don't yet know and that he will be with you always even to the end of the age. Jesus is not finished with any of us yet. As Paul proclaimed in his letter to the Philippians:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being born in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. Amen. (Phil. 2:5-11)

Will you pray with me?