

***The Weakness of Jesus***  
**A Sermon on Mark 14:32-42**  
**Palm/Passion Sunday**  
**March 28, 2021**

**Introduction**

This is Palm Sunday *and* Passion Sunday. We begin on a high point with Jesus' being hailed with Hosannas as arrives in Jerusalem before cheering crowds. Then we turn to the Passion Story. The lectionary puts the entire Passion Story from the Gospel of Mark in the Gospel reading: all of Chapters 14 and 15. If we read it all, there wouldn't be time left for a sermon.

So we have to focus on one part of the Passion Story. For many mainline Christians, the two stories most treasured are Jesus in Gethsemane and Jesus on the cross.

Jesus is at his most human in Gethsemane. He shows us why he is our Lord and Savior.

**First Move: Jesus Prays in Anguish**

The disciples have the Last Supper with Jesus in the upper room, which is somewhere in East Jerusalem, we're not sure exactly where. After the Last Supper, the disciples go to the Mount of Olives, which is on the eastern edge of Jerusalem. It has a spectacular view of the city. Here is a picture I took of it last year.

Jesus predicts that all the disciples will desert him, but after he is raised up, he will meet them in Galilee. Peter protests that he will never desert Jesus, and Jesus predicts that Peter will deny him three times.

Jesus and the disciples make their way down the Mount of Olives to Gethsemane. Gethsemane is in the Kidron Valley at the base of the mountain. Gethsemane means "oil press" in Aramaic. It is one of the holiest sites that I visited last year. It is next to a Catholic Church, and tourists are instructed to remain silent. Gethsemane is a garden of olive trees, maybe 50 feet by 50 feet. The fruit of olive trees produces olive oil.

Here are some pictures that I took of Gethsemane. I talked to the gardener; he has been the gardener at Gethsemane for 25 years. Wouldn't that be a great job? The gardener said that they believe this tree grew from shoots that date back to the days of Jesus. Jesus might have looked at this tree while he was in the garden.

Jesus takes all the disciples with him to Gethsemane. He tells them, “Sit here while I pray.” He takes Peter and James and John, the sons of Zebedee, with him.

Mark’s story of Gethsemane shows Jesus at his most human in all of the gospels. Jesus gets excited and anxious. The Greek word for excited, ἐκθαμβέω, is the same word that appears in Mark’s Easter story, which Mary will preach on next week. The women get excited when they enter the tomb and see a young man sitting down, wrapped in a long, flowing white robe. ἐκθαμβέω could also be translated as awestruck. The NRSV translates it as distressed in this story and alarmed in the story of the women at the empty tomb. We can imagine that Jesus’ heart was racing and that he was anxious. He knew that he was likely to die in the next few days.

Jesus tells Peter and James and John, “My soul is deeply grieved, even unto death.” Jesus is mourning his own death.

He makes a simple request of the three disciples, “Remain here and stay awake.” He separates himself from them, throws himself to the ground and prays. It is one of Jesus’ most famous prayers: “Abba, Father, all things [are] possible to you; take away this cup from me; yet not what I will but what you [will].” He was praying it over and over.

Jesus had told James and John, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?” Now he asks God to take away the cup. Jesus has made three passion predictions in which he says that the suffering, rejection and killing of the Son of Man is part of God’s plan. Jesus rebuked Peter after the first Passion Prediction for denying that the Son of Man would suffer and die.

How do we reconcile these prior statements by Jesus with his prayer in Gethsemane? In the Old Testament, it is not irreverent to go to God in prayer and ask God to change God’s mind. Moses does it. David does it. Raymond Brown in his magisterial commentary, *The Death of the Messiah*, has 90 pages on Gethsemane. Brown says that Jesus’ prayer is not of rebellion but of God’s love and justice. Jesus is asking God to listen and grant his request if it can be reconciled with God’s will.

The cup in the Old Testament means the cup of God’s wrath. It must be drunk by the guilty as punishment.

The cup can also mean fate. Jesus fears that the cup of suffering and death is his destiny.

Is God making Jesus the object of God’s anger? No, but Jesus is at the middle of the great struggle when God’s kingdom overcomes evil. To overcome evil with nonviolence, we must be willing to absorb suffering into our own bodies. It is our refusal to respond to violence with violence that transforms people who are observing the spectacle.

Jesus knows the trauma that faces him and asks God if there is another way to bring about the kingdom. If you live according to the will of God, that will cause you to suffer. It will bring you into people who live for themselves and their own glory and power. It is not God's plan for Jesus to die; God gives the political authorities the freedom to decide how they will respond to Jesus.

Jesus is obedient. He closes his prayer by resolving that God's will be done. "Yet not what I will, but what you will." That is what gives meaning to the cross. Jesus freely decides to take up the cross if that is the only way to carry out God's will.

## **Second Move: The Disciples Fail Jesus**

Jesus' grief is compounded by the disciples. He asks them to stay with him in his moment of crisis and pray for him, but they fall asleep. Jesus goes away to pray three times, and the disciples fall asleep three times.

Jesus confronts Peter, but it is not just Peter who fails him—it is all of the disciples. Jesus says, "Were you not strong enough to stay awake one hour?"

Jesus is echoing the parable of the strong man in Mark 3:27. "No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man." Jesus is in the midst of a struggle with Satan for the kingdom.

This text also hearkens back to the parable in Mark 13 of the slaves keeping watch of the house while the master is away. "Keep awake, for you do not know when the master of the house will come and he will find you asleep."

Jesus recognizes that Peter and the disciples aren't up to the challenge. He tells them, "Stay awake [pl] and pray [pl] in order that you [pl] might not come into temptation." Jesus uses the plural form three times in this verse. He is addressing the other disciples as well as Peter. They are not ready to come into temptation. They cannot stand with Jesus as he endures the suffering that lies ahead.

"The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Greeks saw a dichotomy between spirit and flesh, but the Old Testament does not. They are integrally related. Spirit is the breath of God that lies within each of us. Flesh refers to the perishable, earthy, profane aspects of humanity. Raymond Brown says that flesh connotes weakness not sinfulness. Flesh is the medium through which Satan tries to distract people from God's plan. It represents the vulnerability of people.

This saying applies to Jesus, too. Jesus' spirit is willing, but his flesh is weak. Hebrews 5 expresses the same thought. Jesus is our high priest. He is able to mediate for sinful humanity before God because Jesus himself was clothed in weakness. He is able to sympathize with our weakness because he himself was tempted in the flesh.

The third time that Jesus goes away to pray, he returns and finds the disciples sleeping. “Their eyes were being weighed down.” This is passive voice. It suggests that their flesh is weak. God was weighing down their eyes, just as God hardened the heart of Pharaoh in the Exodus story. God knows that the disciples are not ready to stand with Jesus on the cross, but they will be transformed by the Resurrection. They will find their courage and be witnesses to the kingdom.

Jesus has heard the answer to his prayer. There is no other way. “Enough! The hour has come.”

He tells the disciples, “Behold, the Son of Man is being given over into the hands of sinners.” Being in the hands of someone in the Old Testament means being in the power of someone. This is another example of the divine passive. God will not deliver Jesus from his enemies, but instead will give Jesus over to them. The Psalms talk about the wicked being given over into the hands of their punishers. Jesus is not being punished. In Mark’s theology, Jesus is a martyr; he gives up his life as a ransom for many. Mark draws on the image of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53:10. Jesus recognizes that it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. Jesus chooses to give his life as an offering to the Lord. Jesus’ acceptance of God’s will transforms the situation: instead of God’s giving him over, Jesus gives himself over.

The disciples have fallen asleep three times. Jesus knows they are not ready to drink the cup that he will drink, but he doesn’t give up on them. He says, “Arise! Let us go! Behold, the one who is giving me over draws near.” These are Jesus’ last words to the disciples in the Gospel of Mark.

Jesus’ first words in the Gospel of Mark are, “The time has been fulfilled and the kingdom of God has drawn near; repent and believe in the good news.” Now the one who is giving Jesus over has drawn near. The hour has come. In Mark’s theology, part of God’s plan for the coming of the kingdom is for Jesus to be handed over to his enemies.

### **Third Move: An Authentic Lord and Savior**

Orthodox Christian teaching is that Jesus is fully divine and fully human. The earliest images of Christ date from the second century: they show Jesus as a young shepherd, carry a sheep on his shoulders. When Rome adopted Christianity in the fourth century, that image gave way to Christ Pantocrator, Jesus Almighty. Jesus is all-powerful. He sits on a throne in heaven at the right hand of God. Roman Catholics came to see Jesus as unapproachable. They prayed to Mary, the mother of Jesus. She loves us and intercedes with God on our behalf.

Evangelical Christianity tends to focus on the power of Jesus. Jesus is the divine son of God because of all the miracles: walking on water, healing the sick, raising the dead. He is a God walking around on earth. He alone can take away the sins of the world because he alone can bear them.

Mark's story of Gethsemane reminds us of the humanity of Jesus. Jesus doesn't want to die. That is a fundamental desire that all living creatures have.

Jesus was incredibly strong. He was also weak and vulnerable. He was worried that God was asking him to do too much, that he couldn't handle it.

The weakness of Jesus makes the gospel stories believable. Our Lord and Savior is not some Superman striding across the earth. Our Lord and Savior is authentic because he is like us. He doesn't want to suffer.

Jesus shows us how to pray. He goes to God in prayer when he is most troubled and fearful. He is not too proud to pray for himself.

Jesus practices what he preaches. He shows us what it means to put God's will ahead of your own will. He practices nonviolence even when his own life is threatened.

We are weak and vulnerable and fearful. We need a Lord and Savior who has experienced those things. We need a Lord and Savior who has been torn between following his own will and doing God's will.

The weakness of Jesus makes it possible for Jesus to be empathetic. Maybe he hasn't had our struggles, but he has had his own struggles. We can go to Jesus in prayer, knowing that he too was wounded.

The weakness of Jesus means that he doesn't give up on people. It is too easy to write people off when they disappoint you. The disciples can't even stay awake and pray with Jesus in his hour of need. All he wanted was thoughts and prayers, and they couldn't do that.

The weakness of Jesus means that he forgives the disciples. To forgive means to recognize that people sometimes fall short. That doesn't mean they will always fall short. Jesus doesn't judge the disciples by the worst moment of their lives. People still have the divine spirit of God within them—it just needs to be cultivated. Peter and James and John will be transformed after the Resurrection. They will be courageous witnesses to the gospel. Peter and James will themselves be martyred.

Jesus gives us hope that we, too, can have the strength to carry out God's will instead of our own. We may not be up to it now, but we are on the road to discipleship. We are trying to get there.

Our spirit is willing, but our flesh is weak. We, too, must pray that we not come into temptation. It is too easy to say, "I'm old and tired. What can I do?" We must

continue to open ourselves up in prayer to discern God's will for us. The more we try to discern God's will, the easier it will become for us, the easier it will be to actually do God's will.

We don't know when our hour will come. We can only stay awake and pray.

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