

March 24, 2016

“Jesus Chose You” Maundy Thursday

Matthew 26:36-46; John 17:20

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It's Thursday night ... that infamous, long-ago Thursday night. The week has been full of final events: the final visit to the temple; the final sermon; the final supper; and, now, the most emotional hour of the week, the final prayers in the garden.

The garden is filled with shadows. The low-hanging olive trees are twisted and gnarled. The spring moon casts a silver glow. The clouds float by, the breeze cools, the leaves stir.

A young man prays intensely. That's him. That's Jesus. Kneeling on the ground, his robe soaked in sweat, his hair plastered to his forehead. He agonizes.

A sound is heard from behind the trees. Snoring. Jesus looks across the garden at the dearest friends he has. They are asleep. They're resting up against the tree trunks, sleeping. His prayers don't stir them. His distress doesn't move them. They are worn out.

Jesus stands, walks through the garden, and squats before them. "Please," he asks, "please just stay awake with me." The Lord of the universe doesn't want to be alone.

Jesus looks past his friends, through the trees, and sees the city of Jerusalem spread out on the next hilltop. Jesus knows that it is here, in the Holy City, that the final battle will take place. He sees it coming. He sees what the sleepy disciples cannot see.

Jesus sees Satan getting ready. He sees the dashing of demons. He sees the forces of evil preparing for the final encounter. Jesus sees that Satan has seized the heart of Judas, and has whispered in the ear of Caiaphas, the high priest. Jesus sees hell breaking loose.

History records it all as a battle of the Jews against Jesus. But it wasn't. It was a battle of God against Satan.

And Jesus knows it. He knows that before the war is over, he will be taken captive. He knows that before **victory** will come **defeat**. He knows that before the **throne of triumph** will come the **cup of suffering**. He knows that before the glorious light of Sunday will come the awful darkness of Friday.

And Jesus is filled with dread.

He stands and looks down at the disciples, fighting to stay awake. But he doesn't accuse. He doesn't lecture. Instead, he walks off quietly again, one more time, to pray. His last moments with his disciples are spent in prayer. And the words he speaks are as filled with meaning for us on this Thursday night, as they were on that night long ago.

Imagine, for a moment, yourself in this situation. Your final hour with a son about to be sent overseas. Your last moments with a dying spouse. One last visit with your parent. What would you say? What would you do? What words do you choose?

It's worth noting that Jesus chooses prayer. In his final prayers, he chooses to pray for us. John's Gospel records one of Jesus' Maundy Thursday prayers. He says, "Father, I pray for these men. But I am also praying for all people who will believe in me because of the teaching of these men.

Father, I pray that all people who believe in me can be one. I pray that these people can also be one in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me.”

You need to notice that, in his final prayers, Jesus prays for you. Underline these words in your heart. He says, “I am praying for all people who will believe in me because of the teaching of these men.” That is you. As Jesus kneels in the garden, you are in his prayers. As Jesus looks into heaven, you are in his vision. As Jesus looks ahead to the day when he will be in heaven again, he sees you there with him.

His final prayers are about you. His final pain is for you. His final passion is you.

Yet never has he felt so alone, as in that moment. What must be done, only he can do. An angel can't do it. No angel has the power to break the power of hell. A man can't do it. No man has the purity to destroy sin's claim. No force on earth can face the force of evil and win -- except God.

“My Father,” he prays, “if it is possible, may this cup of suffering be taken away from me.” His humanity begs to be delivered from what his divinity could see is going to happen to him. Jesus, the man, peers into the dark pit and begs, “Can't there be another way?”

Maybe he knows the answer before he asks the question. Maybe his human heart is hoping his heavenly father can find another way. We don't know. But we do know he asks to get out. We do know he begs for an exit. We do know there is a time when if he could do it, he would turn his back on the whole mess and go away.

But he can't. He cannot because he sees you ... right there in the middle of a world full of sin and sorrow. He sees you

buffeted by the hurts and cruelties of life. He sees you betrayed by those you love. He sees you with a body that gets sick, with a sinful human nature that drags you down to hell every day.

He sees you in your own garden of gnarled trees and sleeping friends. Jesus sees you staring down into the pit of your own failures and the yawning mouth of your own grave. He sees you in your Garden of Gethsemane -- and he doesn't want **you** to be alone.

He wants you to know that he has been there, too. He knows what it's like to be plotted against. He knows what it's like to be confused. He knows what it's like to be torn between two desires. He knows what it's like to fear what lies ahead. And, most importantly of all, he knows what it's like to beg God to change his mind and to hear God say gently, but so firmly, "No."

For that is what God says to Jesus. And Jesus accepts the answer. Jesus accepts the will of God. Jesus accepts his destiny, and embraces his mission.

His prayers are now at an end. He stands, and now the anguish is gone from his eyes. His fist will clench no more. His heart will fight no more. The battle is won.

Most often, we Christians think the battle was won on Calvary. But it wasn't. You may think the sign of victory is the empty tomb. But it isn't. There's a sense in which the final battle was won tonight in Gethsemane. And the sign of victory is Jesus at peace in the olive trees, waiting for his betrayer and his accusers.

For it was in the garden that he made his decision. He chose you. He would rather go to hell for you than go to heaven without you. Jesus chose you! Thanks be to God!