

MIDWEEK LENT 2

Gethsemane

The whole mess had begun in a garden, and so Jesus begins His passion in a garden, in Gethsemane. He throws Himself in trusting prayer at the feet of the Father Adam and Eve failed to trust when the serpent deceived them. He prays fervently. He trusts even though in the hours to come it will appear that the Father hates Him rather than loves Him, would abandon Him to hell rather than welcome Him back into the glory of heaven. ***“Thy will be done”*** He prays, even though God’s will, focused upon our good, would lead Him through every evil on the way to His resurrection and ascension.

In anguish over the betrayal and torment that awaits Him, He brings His dearly beloved friends with Him into the garden. We can feel for Him, can’t we? We know what it is like to long for companionship in hard times, to want to feel the touch of a sympathetic hand, or to hear the tender words of a compassionate friend. He brings them with Him and confessed to them, ***“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”*** It ought to pain us to hear our Lord God speak in such a way. See how thoroughly human He has become, how well He knows our sorrows. And yet what do His friends do? They do what we have done too often. They fell asleep. Yes, they were exhausted from sorrow. There were extenuating circumstances. But aren’t there always? They fell asleep on Jesus, their Savior, who in equal and greater sorrow became more focused than ever as He prepared to redeem them at the price of His very own life and blood.

And so in the midst of all this anguish, He is concerned for His Apostles. He knows their weakness. He has taken it upon Himself. ***“Watch and pray,”*** He urges them, ***“so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.”*** And those words ring as true for us this Lent as they did on that first Maundy Thursday. The old wicked foe is still hard at work. Our flesh still struggles against our spirit. The world is still full of distractions and allurements. We must ***watch and pray.***

So how do we do that? First, we need to admit that what we are tempted to is indeed sin. What do I mean? Human beings have an amazing ability to rationalize sin. Even the Nazis, in perpetuating the holocaust, in their own unstable minds thought that they had perfectly rational reasons for committing such horrible atrocities. Think about the things that tempt you. Don’t you sometimes rationalize them? Don’t you sometimes try to diminish their sinfulness by comparing them to what seem to be more grievous wrongs in your eyes? Don’t you sometimes come up with the excuses for having done things before you even do them, justifying iniquity in your own minds? You only got drunk because there was so much stress

in your day. You only got angry because someone else provoked you. You only used foul language because regular words couldn't make your point. You only moved in with your boyfriend or girlfriend to save money. You only clicked on that website out of curiosity. You only ran down someone else with your words because he or she would have done the same to you. You only took what wasn't yours because you needed it more than the person or company you took it from. You only cut corners at work because your boss doesn't appreciate your hard work. The list could go on and on. Maybe you've never thought this way. We'll give you your award after the benediction. But this is the way fallen human beings think, and while we are being renewed in the image of God through faith in Christ, we remain, until we breathe our last, sinner-saints, Christians whose *spirit is willing but whose bodies are weak*. And we are dangerously close to being no Christians at all if we take that as an excuse for sinning, or a reason to despair or throw in the towel. No, we do well rather to take that as a warning, and to prepare accordingly, knowing our vulnerability and addressing it with the Word of God, prayer, and sanctified planning.

Second, we need to remember where to turn, or return, in the hour of temptation. When they arrested Jesus, a man wearing nothing but a linen garment, who had been following Jesus, fled naked when they tried to seize him too. This was most likely Mark, who would later write the Holy Gospel. He would scamper away in fear, like so many of the others who had followed Jesus, but like Peter, who would deny our Lord, while overcome by temptation, sin would not keep its hold on him. The Spirit would lead him back again for mercy, as that same Spirit would lead Peter. The same Spirit is at work for us and in us. The same Spirit uses the tender promises of our Lord to invite us back into His good graces. The same Spirit answers the prayers of our dying Savior, offered not for Himself, but for us, when He dispels despair and works in us anew the hope that springs from faith and flows from Christ's wounds and empty tomb.

We have been tempted, and we have fallen woefully short, but Christ, who healed the ear of the servant Peter had struck, has opened our ears to hear His absolution anew. Listen. Listen, and *watch and pray, so that you will not fall into temptation again. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak*. Christ, however, is strong to save, especially in the weakness He displays on Good Friday, and *He will provide a way out when you are tempted*, and He will put you on His shoulders again when you have strayed. Wake up and pray, for Lent is upon us, and our Savior's arms are spread wide open to receive us. Amen.