

Matthew 26:36-46
April 17, 2011 Palm Passion Sunday

Hampton Baptist
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"The Agony of His Soul"

*"Tis midnight and on olive's brow, the star is dimmed that lately shone.
Tis midnight in the garden now, the suffering Savior stands alone.*

*"Tis midnight and from all removed, Emmanuel wrestles lone with fears;
Even the disciple that he loved heeds not his Master's grief and tears.*

*"Tis midnight, and for others guilt, the Man of Sorrows weeps in blood;
Yet he that hath in anguish knelt is not forsaken by his God.*

*"Tis midnight, and from heavenly plains is borne the song that angels know;
Unheard by mortals are the strains that sweetly soothes the Savior's woe."*

The words of this hymn were penned by William Tappan regarding Jesus' experience in the Garden of Gethsemane. The scene in the stained glass window above our piano is a depiction of a painting by Heinrich Hofmann; it is a very popular scene from the life of Jesus. Growing up, I had one of the renditions hanging on my bedroom wall. I often wondered what Jesus was thinking as he prayed in the moonlight. This morning, I would like for us to explore that thinking.

The time was around midnight; Jesus would be nailed to a cross in about nine hours. Our service today deliberately has moved through Jesus' last week. On what we call Palm Sunday, Jesus had entered Jerusalem to accolades and praises from the people saying, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" The people were hailing their king as he rode triumphantly into their capitol city. The week had included the cleansing of the Temple when Jesus had overturned the tables of those who were unjustly doing business there. Jesus had numerous noteworthy encounters that week, and his presence was certainly recognized by all.

Just before Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane, he shared his last supper with his apostles and signified that Judas would soon betray him. When Jesus shared with his apostles of his impending death and told them that they would all falter in their decision "to follow him," Peter replied by saying, "Even though everyone else will leave, I will persevere to the end." Jesus responded by saying that before sunrise, the time when the rooster crows, Peter would deny him three times.

Peter said, "No, Lord! I will even die with you if that is what it takes!" But we know that Jesus was correct in his prediction; Peter denied him three times.

Our Gospel Lesson stated that Jesus and the apostles went to a place called Gethsemane. Scholars tell us that this garden was probably located outside Jerusalem, near the Mount of Olives. Jesus had left the Upper Room in Jerusalem probably because he knew the authorities would be looking for him. He needed some

time for personal reflection and prayer. Jesus may have frequented this garden, because Judas knew where to find him later.

Upon arrival at Gethsemane, Jesus told eight of his apostles to wait as he went and prayed. He then took with him what some call "the inner three," Peter, James and John. Jesus had depended upon these three for support and had shared experiences with them without the presence of the other apostles. Let's look at two of these experiences.

First in Mark 5, we read of the account of Jairus and his daughter. A ruler of the synagogue named Jairus came to Jesus, and falling at his feet said, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her so that she might be well and live."

Jesus and the crowd left for the home of Jairus to see his daughter. While walking, Jesus healed a lady with a hemorrhaging problem. Meanwhile, someone came from the house of Jairus to say that his daughter had died.

Jesus said, "Don't be afraid; just believe." He then took Peter, James and John, the inner three, to Jairus' home. He told the onlookers that the girl was not dead but was only sleeping. Jesus, the inner three, and the girl's parents went to the girl's bedside, and Jesus then raised her from the dead. The inner three were honored to see a miracle.

On another occasion, he took Peter, James and John to a high mountain for the Transfiguration. As he was standing before them, his clothes became glistening white, and he began to glow. All at once, Moses and Elijah appeared and shared a conversation with him concerning his death. Peter was frightened with what was happening and said, "Jesus, it is good that we are here; let's make three tabernacles: one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

Then a cloud overshadowed them and a voice came down saying, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." At that moment, the inner three looked around and saw no one but Jesus. The symbolism indicated that Moses and Elijah represented the Law and the Prophets: the Jewish scripture of the day. For Jesus to *remain* demonstrated that he was the fulfillment of the Scriptures. The inner three were privileged to see this unfolding revelation.

Peter, James and John were given an opportunity to experience the glory of God through Jesus at the transfiguration, and now they would also be given the opportunity to experience the agony of his soul as he prepared for the cross. For Jesus, he was at an all-time low. Our passage indicated that he began to be grieved and agitated. He knew that the end was in sight. He needed the support of his closest friends, those who had been taken under his wing, the people who knew him best. These three had been exposed to plans concerning Jesus' death, and right now, he needed *their* comfort.

The Greek word translated as "grieved" or "sorely troubled," literally meant "away from home." Jesus began to be sorrowful and homesick. A person's home provides them safety and security. A home is much different from a house. A home does not have to be a structure or dwelling made of brick, wood, or stone. Home is more like a good feeling found in knowing that you are safe.

Many songs speak of home. Country singer Larry Gatlin has said that "home is where the healing is; home is where the feeling is." Contemporary Christian vocalist Tim Sheppard has said "home is where the family is; home is where the loving is." And pop musician Billy Joel has said that home is just another word for his significant other; to her, he says, "you're my home." In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus felt homesick.

When Jesus began his ministry, the crowds were with him, but now they had left him. When he began his ministry, the rulers were interested, and now they were plotting to kill him . . . and he knew it. Jesus had gathered about him a band of disciples, a large company, more than twelve. But there came a day when he tried to teach them on a deeper spiritual level, and many lost interest. But at least, he still had twelve apostles. No, one of them had gone to betray him. But at least he still had eleven. No, eight of them were left at the gate of the Garden. But at least he still had his inner three who had experienced so much with their Master. No, they would be asleep very soon. He felt sorrowful and away from home.

And then he spoke of it! Here was Jesus, the person who was God-become-man, feeling incredible anguish and vocalizing it to his friends. Can you imagine Jesus telling *you* when *he* was hurting?

He said, "My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death. Stay here and keep alert." We often think of Jesus as strong during his trial and his crucifixion, but here in Gethsemane the curtain of his very human self was drawn back for these three apostles. Jesus was filled with agony and dismay as he became more and more conscious of the weight of the burden he was carrying. Jesus had spent the past three years following God's will knowing that his own life would be taken in the end. Now the end was in sight, and the pain was almost unbearable.

In this most critical hour, the Son of God needed, as every human needs, the sympathy of others. Jesus chose the three closest friends he had. No life that is truly human can be truly independent. We all need companionship, and Jesus was no different. In times of trouble, we want someone to be with us. This person does not necessarily have to say anything or do anything. We may not even want to say anything to them. Some have called this "the ministry of presence." It is a ministry just to *be* with someone when they face difficult times. This presence communicates genuine care and compassion. Jesus had requested for Peter, James and John to perform the ministry of presence. And why not? Peter had said that he would never deny his Lord, and if necessary, that he would even die for him.

A few weeks earlier, James and John had asked Jesus if they could sit on his right and his left when he came into his glory. Jesus then asked them if they knew what they were requesting. He asked them if they were prepared to partake of the same suffering that he himself would encounter, and they said yes. So these three apostles had stuck their necks out by saying that they would stick by him until the end.

Jesus then went a little farther and fell to the ground. The burden that he bore was seemingly too heavy to bear. He was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders and simply could not take another step. While on the ground, he prayed

that despite his pain, God's will be done. Despite the fact that he could hardly walk another step because of the acuteness of the moment, he still prayed for God's will to be accomplished.

We have heard the rest of the story. Jesus found his inner three asleep three different times. Not only was he shouldering a great burden of the world's sin, he was also now having to face abandonment! His three most trusted apostles and friends could not even stay awake with him, pray with and for him. Jesus had told them of his pain; he had told them that he was grieved to the point of death, yet *their* need proved to be more important to them. Despite their previous rhetoric about staying with him until the end, they slept when Jesus needed them the most.

Are we like the inner three? How many times have we told God that we would do something and then when the going got tough or we got tired, we just quit? And if we did not quit, we just went to sleep--meaning we were there physically, but emotionally we were elsewhere.

Despite finding his friends asleep when they said they would stick by him, Jesus continued to pray. It was during his third prayer that he finally found a peace with the situation. As a result of his prayers, Jesus found the strength to continue. As a result of his prayers, Jesus was granted peace.

Today, many of us face despair, loneliness, disappointment and maybe even emotional abandonment. Jesus certainly has felt these same emotions; therefore he can and he wants to be of great help to us. Many of us have had our own Gethsemane experiences, and we will continue to face despair. Even when skies are gray, when we are tired of trying, when bad news becomes a regular occurrence, can we like the disciples say, "My Jesus, I'll never leave you?" And if we say "My Jesus, I'll never leave you," will we also model the disciples behavior by abandoning the Savior? Each of us have to continue to answer this question every day. How will *you* respond?