



Roanoke, Virginia

Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020

## *“Deliver Us from Evil”*

*Part VI of the Lenten Sermon Series, “Pray Then in This Way.”*

*Mark 14:32-42*

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<sup>32</sup> They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” <sup>33</sup> He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. <sup>34</sup> And he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.” <sup>35</sup> And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. <sup>36</sup> He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” <sup>37</sup> He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? <sup>38</sup> Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” <sup>39</sup> And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. <sup>40</sup> 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. <sup>41</sup> 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. <sup>42</sup> Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

Pray then in this way: lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

If you’d seen the crowds that day, as Jesus rode triumphantly on a colt into the city of Jerusalem, if you’d seen the crowds that day you never would have guessed that Jesus’ own time of trial would come so soon. The people threw their cloaks on the ground, they covered the path with leaves, to honor him. They waved branches and cheered, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”



And yet here we are, in our passage this morning, just days later, just two pages later, and the shouts of Hosanna are nothing but a distant memory. Jesus is alone. His friends are asleep. He has thrown himself on the ground to pray at a place called Gethsemane, most likely a garden at the foot of the Mount of Olives. He is so distressed and agitated, or as scholar Joel Marcus translates it, he is so overwhelmed and anxious,<sup>1</sup> he is so grieved in his soul, grieved to death, that it's all he can do to form sentences. It's all he can do to lift his wholly honest thoughts to God, and he prays that if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He says, "Abba, Father, remove this cup from me, lead me not into the time of trial, deliver me, rescue me from evil." And then somehow, from the ground, Jesus prays the most profound and necessary prayer, the prayer that is the foundation for our Christian life: "God, not what I want, but what you want."

Personally, I have not yet mastered that particular prayer.

I'll tell you, these last three weeks, my prayer life has looked a lot more like the first half of Jesus' prayer than the second. Maybe you're better at giving up control than I am, but I imagine many of you can relate. The times we are living in are overwhelming.<sup>2</sup> Anxiety is everywhere. The amount of communal grief we've been experiencing can feel crushing. The isolation, the fear for the people we love. We're mourning graduations and weddings and meeting newborn grandchildren. We're even grieving the chance to share our grief at funerals, or with family. It can feel crushing.

I wonder if, in the garden, Jesus was thinking what I've been thinking lately. I've been thinking, Take me back to my *real* life. Take me back to the cheering crowds. Take me back to the time when we were all praising God, in the same place, together. Today I miss the waving palm branches and the songs of children and the sound of many of voices shouting together, "Hosanna!" I'm not sure about *God's* will, but I'm sure of my own will, so today it feels like the best prayer I can muster is to join my voice with Jesus praying, "Deliver us!"

And I think we can feel justified if that's the best prayer we've got today. Jesus told us we should pray like that. Pray like this, he said: Lead us not into the time of trial, but deliver us from evil.

Evil is one of those words that many of us preachers prefer to avoid. It's honestly more fun to preach about hope about beauty about love. Back when we were planning this sermon series, I thought I drew the short straw when I got this last petition, deliver us from evil.

And then there was a pandemic. The question of evil is pretty much unavoidable these days; evil on a grand, abstract scale, and on a more specific, personal scale. We're not going to solve today the problem of evil, where it comes from, why it happens—but we know it's there. And when I recognize evil and its effects in the world around me, all I want is to find someone to blame. It makes me want to point my finger—at this particular moral failing of a government or leader, at

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus, Joel (2009). *Mark 8-16*.

<sup>2</sup> For helpful background, see this interview with Dr. Curt Thompson: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmcPgnKerHA>.



those selfish people who refuse to stay at home, at that nursing home whose policies and procedures ultimately endangered my grandma, at that broken system that left us unprotected in the first place. Deliver us from evil.

The perhaps even more difficult realization, though, is the ways I've noticed the effects of evil in myself. In my self-protective desire to buy up every bottle of hand sanitizer I see. In how easy it is for my temper to flare up when I'm stressed. In the way my heart feels constricted, less able than usual to carry compassion and sympathy for the grief of others while I focus on my own.

Jesus puts it well when he tells his sleepy friends the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. And we know it's true. We've known it since we first ate that fruit in the original garden—from the grand systemic scale to the secret places of our hearts, everything is a little bit broken. Our hearts and our lives and our world—we were made good, but we're bent out of shape.

There's a lot we need to be delivered from. Sometimes, even from ourselves.

Saint Augustine presents an image of sin, of the manifestation of evil in our human lives. He uses the Latin phrase *incurvatus in se*<sup>3</sup>—meaning human beings are curved, we're turned in on ourselves. The power of evil has bent us out of shape, it's turned our gaze and our attention away from God, away from our community, to a place where we can see nothing but ourselves—our needs, our anxieties, our fears.

For Augustine, the Christian life is about the unbending of our wills to look more and more like God's will; the turning of our attention from all the overwhelming, anxiety inducing forces that push us to turn inward, towards the love of God.

So it makes me think that when we pray, "Deliver us from evil," we are on the one hand praying that we won't have to experience the time of trial in the first place. We are praying that God will move and heal and redeem and restore and make this nightmare end. Let this hour pass from us. Deliver us. We're praying that for sure. And, at the same time, we are also praying that *when* we face evil, God will give us the wisdom and courage and grace to face even our most difficult nights with integrity and selflessness, with our heads held high, with our attention directed towards God and God's people.

Jesus models for us what this looks like. He begs to be delivered from evil. He tells the truth about the pain of his experience. He doesn't hide his anguish, he's completely honest about his grief. He's so overwhelmed that he throws himself on the ground. And then he gets up, and he entrusts his future to the will of God.

Now there have been some theologians in Christian history who have been a little uncomfortable with Jesus' initial response. They don't like the picture of God incarnate throwing

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<sup>3</sup> Jenson, Matt (2006). *The Gravity of Sin: Augustine, Luther and Barth on 'homo Incurvatus in Se.'*



himself on the ground, overwhelmed with anxiety, begging to be delivered from suffering. They say it makes Jesus seem too human.

Oh, but that's the best part.

Because as humans we're never going to escape the garden. Whoever you are, at some point Gethsemane will find you. It may be this time, it may be the next, but no matter how hard and how often we pray, until only God knows when, we are never going to escape the fact that we live in a broken world. If Jesus' story shows us anything it's that praying against the time of trial doesn't automatically take the trial away. Achieving spiritual perfection isn't going to take the time of trial away. We are going to face evil. And we might even have to face evil alone.

But Jesus has been there. When you are overwhelmed, Jesus has been there. When you are carrying more anxiety than you can bear, Jesus has been there. When you are distressed, when you are agitated, when you are lonely, when you are afraid, Jesus has been there. The epistle to the Hebrews puts it this way: We don't have a high priest who isn't able to sympathize with our weaknesses, we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Grace to help in time of need. The truth of the Gospel proclaims that it is precisely through Jesus', God Incarnate's, sharing in human suffering that he overcomes the world. Jesus doesn't just *deliver* us from evil, he meets us there. He walks with us all the way through the valley until we reach green pastures because he's been there. And he knows the way out. Now that's good news that makes me want to shout Hosanna.

As we begin this Holy Week, we know that our traditions will look different than other years. On this Palm Sunday, our "hosannas" may not sound quite like they used to. The lonely echo of my single voice in this sanctuary is a stark reminder of the realities we're facing. It's a stark reminder that evil is real.

So, I'm grateful for the reminder that Jesus know what this feels like.

Evil is real, but Jesus is with us. And his presence with us in our suffering will become our strength. And over time strength becomes courage. And courage becomes hope. And hope does not disappoint. Easter morning is still coming.

So, my friends, pick yourselves up off the ground, if you're able. Wipe away your tears, just for now if you can. Hold your head high, as high as you can manage. Go out into your garden, or your backyard, or your closet, find whatever leaf or branch like object you have on hand. Hold onto it this year with conviction. No matter the evil you're facing, you will never face it alone. Look—your king is coming. Hosanna in the highest. Hosanna. Amen.

