

## March 28, 2021 | Sanctuary Worship Service | Palm/Passion Sunday

TEXT: [Matthew 26:36–46](#)

TITLE: Prayers + Vigils

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

In the course of this service, we've moved from the triumphant Palm Sunday cheers to Jesus' whispered prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane; from shouted "Hosannas" to breezes rustling the olive trees and Jesus asking that the cup of suffering be taken away from him. It's a dramatic change of events. But it begs the question: Why did Matthew include this in his gospel? He's composing a narrative designed to convince his readers that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, the Son of God. Why not just focus on the miracle stories and the adoring crowds of Palm Sunday? Why write about the awkward Last Supper where Judas is identified as a thief and betrayer, and then describe this garden scene in which Jesus is deeply troubled and prays to be delivered from a fate that includes a cross? The simple answer is that Matthew included these things because that's what happened—and he wanted to offer an honest description of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But the deeper answer is that Matthew told us about what happened in the Garden of Gethsemane because at some point in our lives we will find ourselves in that same garden—either praying or keeping vigil or both. Matthew wants us to know that God will be with us always. And that's the good news of Matthew's gospel.

Two things happened simultaneously that night in the Garden of Gethsemane. First and foremost, it was a time of intense prayer by Jesus. He had led the group of disciples out of Jerusalem onto the nearby Mount of Olives. There he chose not to pray with the others but instead went off by himself to pray alone. Jesus had done this before. Once after healing lots of people in Capernaum, scripture says Jesus got up early in the morning while it was still dark and went to a desert place to pray alone (Mk 1:35). Another time, after feeding a crowd of 5000 from a few loaves and fish, Jesus sent his disciples across the sea in their boat while he remained behind, alone on a mountain to pray (Mk 6:46). At important points in his ministry, Jesus needed time to reconnect through prayer, to draw on the unity that marked his relationship with God.

We've all had these moments—times when we need to go for a walk to clear our heads; times when we need to find a quiet place, a rocking chair, a couch with a thick blanket, to think things through. We end up talking to ourselves and to God at the same time. In critical moments of life, Jesus relied on prayer. That's a reminder for us to do the same. The preacher David Buttrick once said, *Prayer is not a substitute for working, thinking, watching, suffering or grieving. Prayer is a support for all [those other things].* Prayer is what we do when big things, hard things, important things need to be done.

The second thing that happened in the Garden of Gethsemane was that it was a time of vigil. Jesus told the larger group of disciples to stay back while he went off to pray, and then he told Peter, James and John explicitly to keep vigil—to stay awake (Mt 26:38). The word "vigil" generally has three meanings. It used to refer to the late night watch of soldiers who kept vigil, watching for enemy threats. It also referred to the evening before

an important religious festival, like the vigils of Christmas Eve or the Saturday vigil preceding the sunrise of Easter morning. Nowadays, we mostly hear the word in relation to when someone is dying and a spouse or family member keeps a bedside vigil.

One religious writer I read talked about sitting with her grandmother during her last days, keeping vigil by her bedside. My parents died about 10 years ago and I remember keeping vigil with my siblings. There is nothing you can do in those last hours—nothing that will extend their lives. All you can do is wait, watch, speak reassuring words, pray to God, and be with them. During Covid, so many of us have been denied the physical nearness of a final vigil, forcing us to wait, watch and pray from a distance. That's been especially hard on many of you

Whether the vigils are right beside or absent from the person you love, it is a time of hyper-vigilance and of exhaustion. You are alert to every sound, to changes in the person's breathing, to updates from the doctors and nurses, even as you are aware of your own aches and pains and breathing, your own moments of hunger or boredom or sleepiness. The spirit is willing; but at times the flesh interrupts the vigil with its own needs. If ever you've felt guilty about keeping an imperfect vigil, the story of the sleeping disciples nodding off while Jesus prayed is a comforting reminder that no one is perfect. Here's the point: Keeping vigil and praying to God are both forms of paying attention—and whatever we lack in these skills, God understands and forgives us. I'll say more about this in a moment.

The author Kathleen Norris used to teach art on and off in elementary schools. In order to help the students learn how to focus, she would make a deal with them: they could first make all the noise they wanted, and then they'd be silent. When she raised her hand, they could make all the noise possible while seated at their desks—shout, clap, stomp, whatever. The students' eyes grew wide with anticipation, but they had to stop when she lowered her hand. Norris found that it usually took two or three repetitions before the kids learned how to make an acceptable din. The rules for being silent were also quite simple. Don't hold your breath or make funny faces. Just breathe normally but sit still and quietly. This also took a couple repetitions to get it right. Invariably a pencil would roll down someone's desk or someone would shift in their seat. But Norris always found that the children were able to be so still that silence became an actual presence in their classroom.

Some kids loved it, amazed that the room could fall so silent. Others weren't so sure. One boy said, "It's scary. It's like we're waiting for something—it's scary!" Recognizing this, Norris asked the kids to describe what it was like to make noise and what it was like to be silent. Their noise descriptions were full of clichés: we sounded like a thunderstorm, like a herd of elephants. But describing silence seemed to evoke the poets within them. One boy wrote that silence is like a tree spreading its branches to the sun. One girl's words turned into a prayer: "Silence is like spiders spinning their webs; it's like a silkworm making its silk. Lord, help me to know when to be silent." Norris' favorite description came from a little girl at a tiny school in western North Dakota, who wrote this: "Silence reminds me to take my soul with me wherever I go."<sup>1</sup>

Psalm 46:10—*Be still and know that I am God!* Silence reminds us to take our souls with us wherever we go. Both are wise words to live by.

As I said earlier, two things happened simultaneously that night in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was a time of prayer—of Jesus turning to God who is our guide and source of strength. And it was a vigil—the disciples waiting and watching, often in silence, often exhausted, unsure, and imperfectly executed. It was a prayer plus a vigil. Yes, it's true: *the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak*. When Jesus said that, he wasn't chiding us; he was simply stating a fact. Vigils are hard and the flesh is weak. But God's spirit, the source of our spirit, is truly willing. God's grace is made perfect in weakness. So be still and know that God is God. Be still and remember to take your soul with you wherever you go.

Prayers and vigils are not about doing, but about being. They are about attentiveness—being attentive to God's work in our lives and in our world. St. Benedict said there is a double dynamic present in every genuine encounter with God. There is the awareness of our own unworthiness, our need for forgiveness and strength (as our eyes droop while we try to keep vigil as best we can). And there's the awareness of God's superabundant mercy, the grace that literally fills the silence with something tangible, that holds us when we feel alone, that answers the prayers of our lips and the unspoken prayers of our hearts.<sup>2</sup>

It's like I said earlier. Matthew told us about what happened in the Garden of Gethsemane because at some point of our lives we will invariably find ourselves in a similar situation—either praying or keeping vigil or both at once, with our weak flesh, yet willing spirits. Matthew wants us to know that in the end, each of us is forgiven for our failings even as we are encouraged and sustained for the journey ahead. In this part of Matthew's story, Jesus ended the prayer vigil with the words, "Rise, get up, let us be going." Later, the risen Christ will once more extend a helping hand to us and encourage us to get up and to get going—promising to accompany us even to the end of the age.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, 1998, pp. 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> Heather Hughes, "Keeping Vigil", Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2013, p. 72.