

Title: “Why Pray?”

Scripture: Matthew 21: 1-11, Matthew 26: 17-46

Palm Sunday, Year A

4/13/14

Rev. Joy R. Haertig

When Jesus rode the donkey along the road on the way to Jerusalem the people, hoping this might be the next King to liberate them from the oppressive Romans cried out to him a *prayer*: “Hosanna!” which in Hebrew means “*save us*”.

When Jesus celebrated “the Pesach”, the Passover supper with his disciples, he *prayed* at the table.

When the disciples went with Jesus to the place called Gethsemane, he stepped away to spend time in *prayer*.

Why pray?

The story of Jesus’ last days, his time of betrayal by his closest followers, the questioning by the authorities, his violent murder on a cross seems to me to confront us with the very same questions we all live with time and again – ***Why pray? What difference does it make? Where is God? Why do good people suffer?***

Jesus – the teacher that shapes our religious and spiritual path; struggles with these very same questions chooses to pray --- and tells us to pray --- and according to scripture, he even prays for us ---time and again.

Today we see him off alone, away from his friends, praying with his knees in the dirt, a horrific knot in his stomach; his heart beating unusually fast, saying: “*My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.*”

Toss out the theology – the talk of whether or not Jesus knew he had to die – or that it was part of some big plan – That it was God’s ultimate sacrifice...

Toss out all of that and just hear him in his angst.

“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.”

Were these his exact words? Who knows...Maybe they were more like: **How the hell did I get here?**

Or, I’m scared, or I don’t want to die

Or, why me?

Or, why must our people suffer? Why is the world so ugly sometimes? **Why did You create us to do this to each other?**

In all the talk of theology and dogma of why Jesus died – we lose the naked reality of simply hearing and stopping long enough to feel the pain of his loneliness. There is nothing sentimental

about Jesus' suffering. Jesus is on his knees in the naked reality of human violence, pride and weakness, by himself – a human being, aware that he could be facing a horrible, violent and completely public death as a religious and political heretic next to many others who were regularly nailed to a cross by the road as a reminder to others to behave.

This kind of loneliness, despair and fear is a very real human experience – it has been so since the beginning of time and will continue to be so.

Can we pause here this morning just long enough to acknowledge the pit of despair that is part of human existence and not run from it?

(Pause...)

In the depth of that kind of despair, Jesus prayed.

(Pause...)

Why pray?

It didn't do any good, right?

It didn't take away the suffering or make us all love one another and stop the violence.

If the only reason to pray is to “make it all better”, than I suppose prayer is ridiculous.

If the only reason to believe that there is a God is if that God “makes it all better”, than things aren't looking too good for God either!

Jesus is always a teacher for me – and in this story of his despair, I see him teaching us some things about prayer and God that might help us in our own experiences.

In Jesus' despair he steps away from the community, not to shut them out but in order to be truly alone to cry out to a God --- that he **trusts is listening even if silent.**

Rabbi Naomi Levy writes:

“Seeking out the comfort of community can help us enormously when we are in pain, but we must also force ourselves to find moments of solitude. We must not shut people out of our lives, but we must take the time to be alone. No one else can cry for us, no one else can mourn for us, no one else can feel our feelings for us. We have to do all of that. And there are times when we have to do it alone...sooner or later we must actually enter ourselves. We have to settle down inside our own skin and see what is there. It is frightening and it can certainly be depressing and painful. We may have the urge to run away from the intensity of this experience, but we must try to fight that urge. Wisdom, insight, and great peace can be gained only when we are ready to be alone.” (Book: To Begin Again)

Great insight more often than not comes when we are by ourselves searching for answers to ultimate questions.

This is a very intentional kind of solitude – We are not talking about alone time in front of the TV or computer... We are talking about intentional alone time to shed the tears, ask the questions, cry out the whys and walk out the anger.

Perhaps we fear being alone because we fear that we are weak; we fear that the tears will never stop.

Jesus the teacher shows us that we human beings are not weak; there is strength from God in our soul that **will** in time, surface and lead us back to life.

In Jesus' time apart he asks if the "cup of suffering might be taken from him" and we know that it was not. His prayer was not answered.

Prayer is a place for us to honestly plea, ask, beg for anything – but ultimately - prayer is about being connected to the Silent Strength that pulses throughout creation *rather than controlling it*. Prayer connects us to a power that may not eliminate suffering, but it can – it **will – it does** strengthen us in the midst of it.

This leads us to the second teaching from Jesus: *Do not assume the silence of God means that God is absent.*

God lives in the silence --- it is we who must learn how to be okay with that and not expect immediate answers or a quick fix.

This is extremely difficult for 21st century American Christians. It goes against everything else that bombards us on a daily; hourly basis.

We don't wait well.

We are more and more out of touch with the gifts of patience and endurance.

We need to learn to work the muscles of patience and endurance and we need to keep passing their importance and necessity on to each generation. While we love how convenient and fast we can make so many things in our society – and we love the amazing results of modern medicine in so many aspects of our human existence – *there are some realities* such as despair, grief, loss, some illnesses, war, oppression – that will always call for endurance and patience.

Jesus teaches us, that when it comes to God – Silence does not mean absence.

Silence does not mean no.

God lives in the silence; Jesus teaches us to trust the Presence in the silence.

As we journey through this holy week, are you willing to get out of your heads about facts and theology and simply let the story take you to your knees with Jesus in prayer?

Are you willing to take the time to grieve with him in his fear – his discouragement? Are you willing to pause long enough to shed your own tears about the state of our world, its brokenness, the despair we feel as wars continue and people go hungry?

Step away from the busyness of your daily life and consider the amazing courage it took to be Jesus.

Consider what he tried to teach those around him about liberation and standing up for the poorest of the poor.

Consider what he taught about God's love for creation – from small bird to small child, from man to woman, Jew and Gentile, slave and free.

Can you feel his pain on that day when he knew his life was in danger and that the way they punished political prisoners was to nail them to a cross?

In the intimacy of that moment and in the heartache of that pain, Jesus stepped away alone to pray to a Strength he trusted was there...If we see Jesus as a teacher, we are taught something really important in that moment, aren't we?

He teaches us to pray.

His praying **did not** change the course of what happened to him...But we know that after praying he was able to get up off of his knees, brush his hands of the dust; take a deep breath and step out again in faith to face the questions of his adversaries and the reality of a horrific death.

In the silence Jesus found **Strength --there in prayer** – a Power he was able to tap into, both in his soul and outside of it.

He found patience and endurance.

Perhaps that is reason enough to pray.