

“Wake Up!”
Mark 14:32-42; Psalm 31:1-10

My Dad was a Marine. From teaching our pet bird to whistle the “Marine Corp Hymn” to later in life marching in parades with the Purple Heart Club, though he only served during World War II, the Corp was a proud part of his identity.

And yet, as much as that period had molded him, like most men of his generation, he almost never talked about his war time experiences. I knew a few facts. He volunteered, even though his company offered him a deferment. He trained at Parris Island, fought throughout the South Pacific and was with the occupation force in Japan. I knew he was involved in the bloodiest battle of the war, the taking of Saipan. Going in the first wave, a shell hit his amphibious tractor, killing his best friend, who in his last seconds of life, my father tried to comfort while holding elements of his brain matter in his hands. I knew Saipan was where my father earned his Purple Heart.

Yet, my Dad never talked about what it was like to prepare to step onto a beach where a heavily fortified enemy was awaiting you. The only thing he ever said was that you knew the morning the attack was coming because they always fed you steak and eggs, wryly adding, “fattening you up for the kill.” I concluded that fatalistic sense of humor was a hold over from their preparation to get in that boat and face almost certain death.

Through the years, movies have attempted to portray what it was like to prepare oneself to hit the beach, whether in the South Pacific or D-Day on Normandy. Some are a little more romantic like the old movie, “The Longest Day,” some more realistic, like Steven Spielberg’s “Saving Private Ryan.” But I think most men, like my Dad, didn’t talk about it because it was an experience words are inadequate to describe. How do you paint a picture of the fear coursing through your body as you put on your gear, climb down into that amphibious tractor, knowing that every conceivable gun, grenade, and bomb awaits your arrival? All with the sole intention of taking your life. How does a person convince, force himself to march into almost certain death?

It may be that people like my dad, and some of you, best understand and help us conceive what our scripture is relating to us. Jesus and His disciples having celebrated Passover, the Jewish meal commemorating their exodus from Egyptian slavery, and singing a hymn they go out to the Mount of Olives, an area with olive trees for making olive oil. Jesus tells them of his coming death, that all of them will desert him in his time of need. Peter immediately retorts, “Even though I must die with you, I will not desert you.” And verse thirty-one relates that “all of them said the same.”

Jesus takes his inner circle, Peter, James and John to an area called Gethsemane, likely a garden containing an olive press. As he retreats by himself, he asks them to sit and pray. He admits to them that he is deeply grieved, “even

unto death.” Walking a little further, he throws himself on the ground, pleading with God that if there is another way for God’s will to be accomplished, one that will not require his death, please God do it that way. But then he ends his prayer with, “yet, not what I want, but what you want.”

In this time of desperation and trial, he returns to discover that his three closest associates, those he asked to keep awake and pray for him, have fallen asleep. He says to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour?”

Then he once again goes off by himself, praying the same words of petition and commitment. And once again he returns to find the disciples sleeping. Caught again not being willing or able to support him in his darkest hour, verse forty says, “...they did not know what to say to him.”

A third time he goes off to lift his anguished request to God, and a third time he returns to find the disciples sleeping. But by then it is too late, the betrayer approaches. “The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

A religious man who had reached the age of 105 suddenly stopped going to synagogue. Alarmed by the old fellow’s absence after so many years of faithful attendance, the rabbi went to see him. He found him in excellent health, so the rabbi asked, “How come after all these years we don’t see you at services anymore?”

“I’ll tell you, Rabbi,” the old man whispered. “When I got to be ninety, I expected God to take me any day. But then I got to be ninety-five, then 100, and then 105. So I figured that God is very busy and must’ve forgotten about me...and I don’t want to remind him!”

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is looking for a way to avoid God, and the death he knows awaits him.

There are two central elements to this story: Jesus’ relationship with God and Jesus’ relationship with his disciples. And neither of them is very good. He doesn’t want to do what God wants and the disciples don’t want to do what Jesus wants.

This is one of the few places in the gospels where we are permitted to see into the mind of Jesus. And what we discover is a fear we certainly understand; a sense of abandonment we fully comprehend; and a call to obey what feels irrational and illogical, again something we totally grasp.

The Christian Church has traditionally asserted the theological doctrine and mystery that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine, not half and half, not like Superman with human clothing disguising his divine body. And in this scene we vividly see the humanity of Jesus, the frailty of human nature that afflicts each and every one of us. Jesus knows that to take the path God is demanding means torture and death. And, he doesn’t want to do it.

The New Testament was originally written in Greek, and like any translation from one language to another, the English cannot portray the full meaning of the Greek words. In verses thirty-three and thirty-four it records that Jesus was distressed and agitated and he says, "I am deeply grieved, even to death..." The Greek words indicate a horror in the face of a dreaded situation. One commentator translates verse thirty-three as "he began to be terrified and disoriented." Lohmeyer writes: "The Greek words depict the greatest possible degree of infinite horror and suffering." The phrase "even unto death" enunciates a sorrow which almost kills or sorrow so great that death would be preferable. And the customary position of prayer for a Jew was standing. But, here, Jesus throws himself on the ground pleading with God.

One of the reasons scholars confirm the authenticity of this passage is because if it did not occur, you would never make it up. Neither Jesus, nor the disciples, come across in a positive light. They abandon Jesus in his time of need, and he is afraid and desperately trying to get God to allow him to escape what is coming.

And that is exactly why this passage has been so important to the Church through the centuries, and to you and me. In these verses, we discover ourselves: afraid, abandoned, seeking an easier way. We know what God calls us to do: love our neighbor as ourselves (which would include Iraqis, illegal immigrants, presidents of corporate banks, and even members of Congress). God calls us to give our money not only generously, but sacrificially, to make time for family, to honor our parents, to work for justice. And when we attempt these, we look around and it can seem like everyone else has gone to sleep while we are fearfully trying to accomplish all these elements. We understand how Jesus felt, because we feel the same way, agitated, disoriented, sorrowful, afraid.

We believe in Jesus. We trust Jesus. We follow Jesus. Because we know Jesus understands those elements of life which we struggle, the fear that discourages us from going forward, the abandonment we experience even when we decide to follow God. And knowing Jesus understands our trauma, we can choose to follow God in the face of our fear, because that is exactly what Jesus did.

Once during her reign, Queen Victoria of England heard that the wife of a common laborer had lost her baby. Having experienced deep sorrow herself, the Queen felt moved to express her sympathy. So she called on the bereaved woman one day and spent some time with her. After the Queen left, the neighbors wanted to know what the Queen had said. "Nothing," replied the grieving mother. "She simply put her hands on mine, and we silently wept together."

Whenever our struggle to do God's will leaves us feeling alone, abandoned, or afraid, we recall the Garden of Gethsemane and know that the hand of Christ rests upon us.

One of the central themes of this story is the faith of Jesus versus the faithlessness of the disciples. One minute the disciples say they will die before they deny Jesus and the next day they can't even keep awake while he goes through the most difficult period in his life. These three men proclaim they are totally committed to Jesus, even if it means death, but the big Passover meal gets to them and they choose sleep over supporting the man for whom they say they will die.

And yet, in the midst of this embarrassing situation for the disciples, what the incident symbolizes for us is hope. Like the disciples, we are often embarrassed by our lack of commitment. We spout strong words of support and allegiance, but struggle to be civil to our next door neighbor, pay our employees fairly, take care of our parents, bring our children to church. We know what it is like to keep falling asleep when Jesus continues to call on us.

But Gethsemane is a reminder that all is not lost. Forgiveness enables us to put the past behind us, to pick ourselves back up and start again. The same disciples who fall asleep during Jesus' hour of need, when he specifically asked them to keep awake, also become the faith's greatest witnesses, those who proclaim the Christian message to the world. No matter our sin, our on again/off again attempts to be faithful, this story reminds us that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, there is forgiveness, a chance to start over, another opportunity to keep awake.

Will Willimon, in a chapel address called "Sin as a byproduct of worship," tells the story of a friend of his who, while in seminary, served briefly as a chaplain in a state prison. He received a request from a father of a young man who was in the prison. The young man had committed a robbery in a little town and had been sentenced to many years in jail. He was angry, embittered. The boy's father came each week to visit him, but the lad steadfastly refused to see him.

The chaplain was asked to intervene, to plead with the boy to see his father. But the young prisoner refused to reconsider. Despite his refusal, the boy's father took off work every week, boarded a bus, and traveled across the state in the hope of seeing his son. Every week. And every week it became the young chaplain's difficult task to ask the son, "Do you want to see your dad?" He then had to bear word of the refusal to the waiting father. The father would thank the chaplain, gather his belongings, and head toward the door for the bus trip back home.

One day, after telling the father the same thing, that his son would not meet with him, the chaplain said, "No one would do what you are doing. Your son is an embittered, defiant young man. Go back home and get on with your life. No one would put up with this kind of rejection, week after week. Nobody would do this."

And as the father picked up his meager belongings to head out, he replied, "Jesus has put up with it for centuries." And the young chaplain literally fell to his knees at this vision of the love of God.

Gethsemane is a reminder that whatever we have done, or left undone, Christ continues to reach out with love and forgiveness over and over and over again.

“Wake Up!”

This is the Christian season of Lent, a forty day period of penance and contemplation as we prepare ourselves for the celebration of Easter. As each of us considers our spiritual lives, this story reminds us that Jesus understands our struggles. Being fully human means Christ knows our fear, our sense of abandonment, our fight to obey God.

This morning, as we consider whether or not we are sleeping through God’s call to us, let each of us “wake up!” and prepare to stand with Jesus.

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