

# Sermon for Midweek of Lent 1

**Date:** March 9, 2022

**Location:** St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

**Old Testament:** Genesis 32:22–30

**Epistle Reading:** Romans 8:22–28

**Gospel Reading:** Matthew 26:36–46

**Sermon Text:** Matthew 26:36–46

**Sermon Title:** Return to Prayer

**Psalm of the Day:** Psalm 121

## Hymns:

LSB 436 – Go to Dark Gethsemane

LSB 608 – Lord, to You I Make Confession

LSB 772 – In Holy Conversation

LSB 663 – Rise, My Soul, to Watch and Pray

LSB 778 – Grant Peace, We Pray, in Mercy, Lord

LSB 784 – Take My Life and Let It Be

Break Your Hearts (*Tune: LSB 512*)

LSB 738 – Lord of All Hopefulness

## Liturgy:

Creative Worship



*Return to Prayer*



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## **Text: Matthew 26:36–46**

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here, while I go over there and pray.” And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.” And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Sleep and take your rest later on. See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand.”

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Grace to you and peace. Amen.

Our text today is the Gospel you heard from Matthew. There Jesus and His disciples go to the garden of Gethsemane. There Jesus prays and the disciples nap. Whose example do you think we should follow? Our theme today is Return to Prayer. This is God's invitation and command to be constantly in prayer.

Calling people to prayer can be a sensitive subject. If we're really honest, not many are very good at prayer. How many of us stop the day's busyness to pause for 15 minutes of prayer three times a day, like the ancient Church taught? How many of us stop the day's busyness to pause for 15 minutes of prayer seven times a day, like the Church taught about 1000 years ago? How many of us stop the day's busyness to pause for 15 seconds to talk to the God who saved us?

There is always a little twinge of conscience that comes with a discussion of prayer. We have good and pure intentions, but then we read a Scripture passage like Paul's encouragement in 1 Thessalonians to "rejoice always" and "pray without ceasing."<sup>1</sup> That can make one flinch. We tend to worry more than we should, and we certainly don't do a very good job of praying without ceasing.

It is a good bet that your prayer life doesn't measure up to all that God's Word calls us to do, and it probably falls short of whatever standard you might set for yourself. So if you're a little uncomfortable with this topic, that's understandable. My hope is by the time we are done you will know when God calls you to pray, He provides the means to do so and even fulfills for you what you are unable to do. In the same way Jesus is the first mover or primary actor in your salvation, the Holy Spirit is the primary actor in your prayers.

In the Old Testament reading, Jacob is returning home, having been through the wringer with his father-in-law Laban. He is nervous about leaving a bit secretly with all of the people and livestock that are rightly his. He's also worried about encountering his twin brother Esau, whom he imagines is angry about that whole stealing-the-blessings thing. Jacob's world is a cauldron of worry.

So much so that he splits his whole traveling company into two camps in hopes that if Esau and the four hundred men traveling with him encounter one, at least the other camp will be spared. He sends his wives Leah and Rachel and his children and the servants ahead and is left by himself for the night.

What happens next is a wonder. A man appears and wrestles with Jacob all night long. Apparently it was quite a match, because neither came out on top through the whole ordeal. As things unfold we slowly begin to realize this was no

1 1 Thessalonians 5:16-17

ordinary wrestling match. Jacob wasn't wrestling just anyone, he was wrestling the Son of God Himself! The one who would later become incarnate, flesh and blood. The same Body and Blood we receive in the Sacred Meal from this altar. Jacob was wrestling with Jesus.

This isn't just a story. This match really happened. The lesson we can learn from it is the trials and temptations God allows us to bear are ultimately intended not to destroy us but to build us up and to bless us. Just look at the cross of Jesus to see how God can use suffering to bring good.

You can also use this event as a lesson for your prayer life. In a sense you wrestle with God in your prayers. You ask for the things that you believe you need. You struggle with the prayers that are not answered the way you hoped. You long for God's clear guiding and directing, and you groan under the weight of the trials that you must endure. In God's time, and in God's ways, through your prayers and your wrestling, God changes you. He forms you. He molds you into something more like Jesus.

Selfishly and sinfully we may think our prayers as a time of our wrestling with God but it is not. It is actually a time when God is wrestling with you? A time He uses to reorder your perspective and your perception. You might think you're leading the journey. You 're not. Your prayer journey is not yours. It is the one God has laid out for you.

One of the things Jacob says to his opponent is, "I will not let You go until You bless me."<sup>2</sup> Put that in your own words. Pray like that. Pray something like: "I won't stop praying until You answer me." It should call to mind the parable of the persistent widow. You know, the one Jesus used to emphasize how to pray and how much greater the blessing is from a God who actually loves you and cares about you.<sup>3</sup>

The problem is most of us don't come to prayer prepared to go toe-to-toe with Almighty God all night long. We don't train to be prayer warriors. Most of us are not equipped for that kind of battle. We don't come fitted with the armor of Ephesians 6. In fact we generally do a pretty poor job of being constant or consistent even in short little baby prayers. The truth is some are often not entirely sure how to pray.

They wonder: What do I say? How can I come before God and speak with any kind of eloquence? Words fail. Emotions overwhelm. Being very aware of our

2 Genesis 32:26

3 Luke 18:1-8

shortcomings, and not feeling like we have any kind of credibility to ask God for anything.

We're a lot more like Peter, James and John in Gethsemane than we are like Jacob wrestling with Jesus. We're more likely to fall asleep when we should be praying, dozing off when we should be watching and alert. We don't know what to pray, and we're not sure how to pray. So we don't pray. At least not as often as we should.

When you listen to that Gospel reading, I bet you could identify with Peter and the other disciples. You probably feel a little foolish stumbling in your prayer life, in much the same way they did. At least you don't have look Jesus in the face, calling you out for your failures. If you took that reading to heart, you should feel like our Lord was chastising you.

Paul offers the answer, and we need to hear it. Paul says we don't know what to pray. We don't really know how to do this prayer thing, but that's okay. Because

the Holy Spirit Himself intercedes for us  
with groans too deep for words.<sup>4</sup>

What the Spirit does, you can be sure He does perfectly. Your prayers may falter and fail, but the Holy Spirit makes up for that. What you cannot do God does for you. What you are unable to do God does with perfect ease. Where you fail, God never does. Joshua, among others, tells us:

Not one Word, of all the good promises the Lord has  
made... has failed; all come to pass.<sup>5</sup>

Your prayer life reflects your faith, and your salvation. While you falter and fail in your daily life of prayer, Jesus has stepped in and made up for it. What you could not do, Jesus did for you. What you were unable to do, Jesus fulfilled faithfully. Where you failed, Jesus was found faultless.

Make that Cross the primary focus of your prayer life. Let it embolden you to be willing, even eager, to pray. Just pray and let that Cross comfort and soothe your soul as you speak your prayers to a loving God<sup>6</sup> who sent His only begotten Son to save you.<sup>7</sup> Know your failures do not define you before God. Jesus' perfection covers all of your imprecatory<sup>8</sup> thoughts and acts, and He bear up on His righteousness.

4 Romans 8:26

5 Joshua 21:45

6 1 John 4:8,16

7 John 3:16-17

8 Meaning: To think or speak evil or curses on a person.

God commands you to pray because we need to pray. He doesn't need our prayers.

Certainly God gives to everyone without our prayers, even to all evil people, but we pray God would lead us to realize this, and to receive our blessings with thanksgiving.<sup>9</sup>

God commands you to pray, but He doesn't leave you alone with it. The command simply brings you to the foot of the Cross, where you can look up and see the Gospel reality that covers your mess. Know this. Your prayers are a means by which God is forming and molding you. He will intercede where you fall short. When God calls you to pray, He provides the means to do it, and He even fulfills where you fall short.

May that be a comfort and an encouragement as you respond to Jesus' call to "Return to Prayer."

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

**Proclaim God's Word,  
Encourage one another in faith,  
Witness to God's love and  
Serve all people**



9 Paraphrase: Luther's Small Catechism: Explanation to The Fourth Petition. "Give us this day our daily bread"