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April 2, 2023

Scripture: Matthew 26: 36-46

Sermon Title: Sacred Compassion

Prayer...

Introduction:

Palm Sunday is a time to remember Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a colt. We remember that Jesus came as a humble King, a different kind of Messiah. Jesus is the Savior who identifies with the poor and outcast rather than the military leader who wins battles with the sword. Jesus is our nonviolent God who suffered for us.

Today, I want us to remember Palm Sunday and the hosannas that accompanied Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, but I also want us to reflect on another story. This morning I want us to remember Jesus' time of prayer in Gethsemane prior to his arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

Jesus went to Gethsemane to pray because it was his custom to pray at night, especially when he was under stress. It was not unique for him to

pray in a garden or on a mountain, nor was it abnormal for him to bring some friends to pray with him. Remember when Jesus was transfigured he had Peter, James, and John with him.

Similarly when he goes to Gethsemane he brings Peter, James, and John to keep him company. In Gethsemane, Jesus is in deep pain. The Scriptures say that Jesus is deeply grieved even unto death, which means he is suffering great mental anguish. Like any normal human, facing the reality of the cross, he desires to save his life. He asks God for the cup of having to die on the cross to pass from him. He throws himself down in prayer, showing his deep emotion and longing for God to release him from such a painful reality. Jesus longs for his disciples to support him during his anguish, but they fall asleep. In Luke's version of this same prayer, an angel comes to comfort Jesus and give him strength. Jesus ultimately tells God that he is willing to do his will and face the cross. He prays three separate times. The number three represents wholeness and completeness and symbolically points to the

way the number three is used in other parts of the Gospels, such as Jesus rising from the dead on the third day.

As I reflect on the story of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, I am moved by how his own suffering in Gethsemane and later on the cross demonstrates Jesus' own compassion for the world. Jesus becomes the crucified God. He will take on human suffering on the cross as an expression of divine love for the world. The Scripture is clear that Jesus could avoid the cross if he wants. He could use his supernatural powers to stay protected from any harm, but Jesus suffers as a normal human being would the anguish of facing the cross.

In our experience as humans, we develop capacity to love sometimes by how we suffer. How often do we hear people who become activists for certain causes or who raise money for certain charities after they experience personal pain. This last week we saw another horrible shooting at a school, this time Covenant Presbyterian Christian School

in Nashville Tennessee. We are reminded of Sandy Hook and other school shooting and the parents and families of people who have faced similar tragedies. Out of tragedy, people take up the cause of asking for gun control legislation to help avoid further tragedies. Money is also raised to help families begin a process of some form or recovery after great loss. After last week's tragedy, we join in prayer for all those impacted by this terrible loss.

In times of great suffering in our personal lives and in the lives of small or large communities, we are invited to remember that Jesus Christ is the ultimate expression of God's compassion for the world. Jesus' capacity for compassion is shown in his suffering in Gethsemane and in his suffering on the cross.

We do not follow a distant God who is aloof from the pain of the world. Instead, we follow a loving God who entered a vulnerable world, became one of us, and ultimately suffered and died on the cross to show his compassion for the world.

Sometimes we wonder in the midst of suffering we see every day, where is God? Does God care? The answer is Jesus is with those who suffer. In our human longing we wish suffering would not occur. Like Jesus we cry out for the crosses of life to pass from us. And sometimes we are protected from pain or healed from our diseases. It is good to ask for protection and relief from suffering. But sometimes we do face crosses and sometimes the suffering is great and the resurrection promise is not fully experienced until a future time. So, in the paradox of human suffering, Jesus comes to comfort us and give us strength, just as an angel comforted him in his anguish.

During the Season of Lent we have explored John Philip Newell's book Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul as we have learned more about Celtic Spirituality. Newell includes a chapter in his book on Sacred Compassion. He reminds us that Celtic Christians value compassion as a key demonstration of Christ-like faith.

Newell tells the story of his mentor and friend the Rev. George Macleod, who was a Presbyterian minister who lived from 1895-1991 and was maybe best known for his work rebuilding the Abbey on the island of Iona. George Macleod wanted to rebuild the Abbey in order to rekindle the spirituality of St. Columba and the original Celtic Christian vision that took root in Scotland in the 6th century. Macleod was also known for his great compassion and his heart for nonviolence. He was a former military veteran who felt called to become a pacifist and who spoke out against military violence during World War II and at other times during his lifetime. Macleod would sometimes greet people with the question, "Do you believe in nonviolence?" He also liked to ask people, "Are you a Presbyterian or a Christian?" - implying that people should focus on following Jesus rather than identifying too strongly with a denominational identity.

Macleod was such a gifted preacher that people said he could have been the pastor at any parish in Scotland, yet he chose to pastor the

poorest parish, Govan Old in Glasgow which was a community suffering with unemployment and other economic hardship.

Macleod understood that Christ was present among those who suffer.

For Macleod Christ was present in the material world, including the suffering of the world. Everything was sacred to God. God entered into the brokenness of humanity and brought life and love.

Macleod was known for writing Celtic prayers that highlight God's compassion. Here is an example:

Almighty God...

Sun behind all suns,

Soul within all souls...

Show to us in everything we touch and in everyone we meet

The continued assurance of thy presence round us,

Lest ever we should think thee absent.

In all created things thou art there. In every friend we have

The sunshine of thy presence is shown forth,

In every enemy that seems to cross our path,

Thou art there within the cloud

To challenge us to love.

Show to us thy glory in the grey.

Awake for us thy presence in the very storm

Till all our joys are seen as thee

And all our trivial tasks emerge as priestly sacraments

In the universal temple of thy love.

Friends, today as we remember the example of George Macleod and the call to compassion in the Celtic tradition and as we bring to God our grief for the pain in the world, we find great comfort in Jesus Christ who willingly experienced human suffering and who embodies the compassion of God for the world.

As we enter this Holy week together may we find comfort in our Savior
Jesus who chose the nonviolent way of the cross and who therefore can
identify with the great suffering of our world.

In the Name of Christ We Pray. AMEN.

Matthew 26:36-46

Jesus Prays in Gethsemane

36 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." 37 He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee and began to be grieved and agitated. 38 Then he said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." 39 And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want but what you want." 40 Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? 41 Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial;[a] the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." 42 Again he went away for the second time and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." 43 Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. 44 So leaving them again, he went away and

prayed for the third time, saying the same words. 45 Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Now the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. 46 Get up, let us be going. Look, my betrayer is at hand.”