**Watch and Pray**
Sermon Text: Matthew 26:35-41

It was in a garden, where everything was perfect, that Satan came to Adam and Eve and slipped poison into their minds using his lying, forked tongue. This ruined everything. Death began to seep into all creation: flowers began to wither; animals lost their tameness; fruit began rotting on the trees; insects began biting. Man went into hiding from a God whose visits he used to look forward to with such eagerness. Man began aging, and laboring, and sweating, and suffering, and dying. Adam and Eve lived a long, long time the Scriptures say, but they would eventually bend over and shrivel back into the dust from which they were formed. Their sin would bring an even worse fate. So they wanted to talk and listen to Satan? Well, by their rebellion against the will of God, they and all their descendants earned the right to do just that forever, in hell.

In our text from St. Matthew’s gospel, we are in another garden, the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus had just ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey a few days earlier, right past this garden. Now here he is, standing—trying to—under the heavy weight of his suffering for the sins of the world, which was already beginning. Here was “ground zero”; here, in this garden, the Son of God would begin in earnest to undo the hellish work that Satan did in that other garden.

In Psalm 40, a messianic psalm, the Son of God (before he was born as Jesus) prophesied about himself: “Here I am, I have come—it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart” (Ps 40:7,8).

Tonight this same Son of God who came for us speaks from this garden across the centuries and tells us three words of truth to sharpen our spiritual focus on our Lenten journey to Calvary: **Watch and pray.**

1. **Watch our Savior faithfully do the will of God.**
2. **Pray that God’s will also be done in us.**

1. **Watch our Savior faithfully do the will of God.**

There have been great tragedies in the history of the world caused by such small, small things. Think, for instance, of how in 1986 the space shuttle *Challenger* and its crew were destroyed shortly after liftoff because a small piece of equipment—an O-ring—had failed. Or think of how some of the great wildfires out west have been started by a small spark.

In the Garden of Eden, it seemed to be such a small thing—a little choice that the devil was offering Eve. But it was a deep, profound, and wickedly genius temptation. What Satan was after was to corrupt the will of man. “Look at you!” he said. “You are the crown of God’s creation, even above me.
But don’t you think God should treat you more as an equal than as a—servant? I know a way to make that happen. . . .”

Ever since then, our human will has been in a relentless battle with God’s will. Think how casually we use that first person pronoun. We talk about “my life” and what “I” want. In our world, we hear people assert all the time (especially when it comes to their sexuality): “I want to be who I am! I have the right to be me!” This in-born self-centeredness goes beyond sexuality, of course, into every aspect of sinful human life. It corrupts every aspect of my life. What Satan did in that first garden was to teach us to defiantly say to God, “No! My will be done! My will be done! And you have to accept me on my terms, God!” Now, we’re born that way; even two-year-olds know how to do this. What Satan didn’t tell Eve was that this was the very defiance that got him thrown out of heaven and condemned to hell—he and his followers with him.

But look! Here is the second Adam—Jesus. He has come to do everything right, to make everything right. He won’t blow it as the first Adam did.

But watch what it is going to cost him to do that. He took the three—Peter, James, and John—with him and told them to watch. Not to watch for Judas, not to watch for soldiers or danger, but to watch him. Watch—and try to understand what is going on. For these three had been with Jesus when he had raised a little girl from the dead. These three had stood for a moment in Jesus’ glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. But they needed to watch him now, at this hour, to understand that being the Messiah did not mean shining success after shining success, triumph, glory, fame, power, etc. Rather, it meant Jesus humbling himself and being obedient to God’s will, suffering even death on a cross for the sins of the world.

But what that means! You know, there are stories of early Christian martyrs in the years after Jesus ascended into heaven, of how they would be condemned to die for their faith and yet would march off to their public executions with joy on their faces and hymns of praise on their lips. They were going to heaven! It wasn’t death; it was the beginning of life! The Romans didn’t get it. But why then (as one Lutheran theologian noted) doesn’t Jesus face his death the same way? The original words here mean that Jesus could barely stand, that his anxiety was so great that he was literally bewildered and confused. He threw himself facedown on the grass under the burden of it all. What does this mean?

This was going to be no ordinary death. His Father asked him to drink the cup of his judgment—a cup filled with the most vile, putrid, reeking substance there is, because that is what sin is like to God. Jesus would be covered with it and experience God’s full wrath. As a true human being, his knees buckled at the very thought.

But watch what he says: “Yet not as I will, but as you will.” The tempter
had come to a garden again to try his old trick of warping the will. But here he lost. The Son’s will remained in harmony with his Father’s, and he would follow through on the divine plan. Thanks be to God!

1. **2. Pray that God’s will also be done in us.**

   Yet as he returned to his disciples, what a contrast. They were sleeping. Imagine that. Peter had said, just an hour earlier, that he would not forsake Jesus, that he would be willing to die; he protested Jesus’ words of warning vehemently. A few months earlier James and John had confidently asserted to Jesus that they could undergo the same baptism of suffering that Jesus was about to undergo. Yet here they all were—asleep—these fishermen (as one commentator said) who were used to staying up all night on the Sea of Galilee to make a living. Jesus’ confrontational question really sounds like this in Matthew’s original Greek text: “You guys weren’t strong enough to keep watching, were you?” Answer: “No.”

   “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” This flesh is weak, weakened by the sin that lives in it. We know the good and even desire in our new spirit to do it, but so often we just can’t. We fail to resist. We fail to watch. We fail to pray. We even play with fire . . . and get badly burned.

   The season of Lent calls us to spiritual discipline, to watch and pray. Yet Jesus here doesn’t tell us to somehow, inside of this weak flesh, find some kind of strength, some kind of resolve to just try harder and do better. He doesn’t just say “watch and pray,” but “pray so that you will not fall into temptation.” Prayer is important in the Christian’s life. But here Jesus isn’t talking about praying for the sick, praying for blessings, or praying in thanksgiving. Rather, Jesus is saying that spiritual discipline is to pray for God’s powerful help in the time of testing.

   Really, what Jesus is telling the disciples (and us) is no different from what he taught us to pray in the Lord’s Prayer: “And lead us not into temptation.” This is a prayer for God’s protection, God’s strength, God’s help against the spiritual attacks daily launched against us by the devil, the world, and our own sinful nature. We can’t stand against these attacks on our own; we’re far too weak, and it’s nothing but arrogance to think we can.

   But here is a prayer that certainly is powerful. It is a prayer that also ties in closely with the Third Petition: “Your will be done.” For this is God’s will: to break and frustrate every evil plan of Satan and to protect his believers all the way to eternal life through his powerful Word that teaches us to cling in faith to his Son, our only Savior. It is not a prayer that God’s will be done by us, but rather for us and in us. This is his good and gracious will, as the catechism says, for which God directs us to pray. May we be faithful in doing so.

   And as we see our Savior suffering in the garden, we are encouraged to pray this, for we know how eager and able our Father is both to hear and to
help—to his glory and for our salvation. Amen.