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Lenten Sermon 4: The Sign of Agony: Luke 22:44, 1958

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THE SIGN OF AGONY

Luke 22:44 And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly:
and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood
falling down to the ground.

All of us have learned how difficult it is to understand fully the sorrow and suffering of another person. To go beyond understanding to feeling is even more difficult. When tragedy strikes a friend, we can and should be sympathetic. We should suffer with him. However, we have also learned that no matter how hard we may try we can really never enter the inner recesses of the heart of another. This is where the last and deepest suffering takes place. Some time ago many newspapers reported the story of a little child who was run over by a truck driven by a friend of the boy's family. Any one who read the story was deeply shocked. Hearts went out to the neighbor who was so innocently the cause of the tragedy. Many expressed their sympathy. And yet the last measure of suffering and sorrow was beyond the reach of our words. We were not able to cross the final barrier between their lives and ours.

Of course God could enter into this sorrow, right into the very heart of it, but not we. There are always inner recesses and corners of the human personality which another person cannot reach. It is inevitably and tragically true that the ultimate sorrow of the human heart and soul must be borne alone. I am certain you will understand why I mention this. The task we have set for ourselves in our Lenten worship tonight is even more difficult. We must try to understand as clearly as we possibly can the suffering of a man, not

in our own community, but in a garden six thousand miles away in space and two thousand years away in time.

Furthermore, this suffering Man was not only man but also God. We must understand His suffering not only with our minds but with our hearts. We must really sympathize -- "suffer with" -- at least a part of His sorrow. Some of His sorrow must become our sorrow, and some of His pain our pain.

Now one may legitimately ask the question: Why must we do this? There is only one answer. The suffering Man in the garden was and is our Savior. All of us were in His heart that night and that in a way in which we can never fully understand on this side of the veil. We were a part of the agony of Gethsemane. The sin which we committed so easily and so carelessly yesterday or today was in that garden. It was the basic, ultimate and terrible reason for the drops of blood, the sword in His heart, and the agony of His soul. The words of the great spiritual, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" also apply to Gethsemane. They come to us, even after all these years with an insistent and powerful urgency. We were there.

There is, therefore, every reason for us to look very closely at the scene in the garden. Just what was going on there? What does it mean for our life and for our destiny?

Certainly it was a very strange situation. From time immemorial men had dreamed of God and the gods and of their meeting with divinity. They had built altars and temples for their deities. They had imagined the gods seated on Mount Olympus, or elsewhere, forever young, forever fair, aloof and cold. The gods were interested in men, but only to see to it that their laws were carried out and that transgressions of the laws of the universe were

properly and inevitably punished. Gods were gods and men were men. That was the way, men thought, the universe was arranged before Bethlehem and Calvary.

Here now in Gethsemane, however, there is something amazingly different. Jesus Christ, God and man in one person, lies on His face beneath the olive trees. His sweat falls like drops of blood upon the earth. The immeasurable space around Him is filled with wheeling suns and stars which He has placed in the long whirling of the worlds. His hands, the same hands which were active at the creation of the universe, clutched the dust of the garden in agony. The Paschal moon, His moon, shines over waste oceans and waving tree-tops and looks down to light His face torn by an agony which was new on the earth.

Certainly there had never been anything like this in the long and bitter story of man. It may be that for some of us in this church now there will be in the years ahead some dark valleys, some agony of soul, some great loneliness. But we shall never know anything like this -- all the world's aching sadness, this drying up of the fountains of life, this unimaginable sickening of soul. This was God and man suffering, and God can suffer more than men.

With this statement we are now beginning to touch the meaning of the scene, the reason for it, and the purpose of it. Perhaps there should be a warning at this point that many people will not want to see the true meaning of this agony under the Paschal moon. There may be various reasons for this reluctance to get close to it. Primarily, however, the reason lies in the fact that the true meaning of the agony in the garden is intimately, terribly, and eternally personal. It strikes every human being that has ever lived. It

concerns everyone of us in this church--and certainly we do not like to be directly involved in such terror of soul.

But there are also other human approaches to this agony. In order to soften the horror of the garden men have said that His courage failed Him momentarily. He knew that in another twelve hours He would be dying on a Cross. He was, they say, afraid of death. He did not want to go through with the next fifteen hours. This is obviously untrue. Could He have been afraid of death? Then He would have been weaker than many brave men who faced death without flinching. He would have been weaker than Stephen whose face shone as the stones struck him. He would have been weaker than all the great company of martyrs who met death gladly for His sake. He would have been even weaker than some of the men in this church tonight who looked squarely at death on the land, on the sea and in the air during the days of war fifteen years ago.

No, it was nothing like that. He was not afraid of Death or dying. If we look closely at His prayer in the garden, we see that He speaks to His father not about tomorrow or what would happen on Friday afternoon. He is in agony over something that is happening right now. "This hour" -- "this cup!" He is asking His father in heaven to help Him in the climax of the atoning life and work which would go on until Friday afternoon. His agony of body and mind and soul was over something that struck Him under the olive trees with the disciples sleeping, the world at silent midnight, and the uncalled legions of angels looking on in horrified wonder. What was the real cause of His agony?

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of sin and grace. What struck Him in the garden, pierced His soul, and painted incredible agony on His face was: Sin. There were voices, far and unheard, in the garden that night: "God hath made Him to be sin for us." "The Lord hath laid upon ^{Him} ~~us~~ the iniquity of us all." "Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." In some mysterious way, known only to God, all the timeless sin and sorrow of all life and history gathered in His soul that night in the garden. All of it was there. None of it was missing. He bore it all and He bore it alone. No one was with Him in the wine-press of divine judgment.

Now we must again make this very personal and very up-to-date. That bit of gossip in which we indulged a few days ago; that lingering impurity in our lives; that murder in the newspapers of our great cities; the hate in our hearts; these massacres in the concentration camps and prisons of our world--all of these, all of these, were on His head that night. He was sin! He was sin and evil incarnate during that hour.

And having said that we still shall never really know what it fully means because it was one of the great unique experiences of the God-man. It is the heart of our entire Christian faith--the total transfer of sin to the bleeding head in the garden and on the Cross.

There is, however, one way in which we can understand it. We may never fully grasp its meaning for Him, but its meaning for us is perfectly clear. We can leave this church today quiet, free and forgiven by faith in His atoning suffering as our Substitute. Our faces can now be calm and peaceful because His face was torn by agony. We can look up to God because He looked down

into the lowest corners of hell. Every evil thing that worries us, every hidden sin, every fault we can leave in the garden with Him. He took care of it. It is His and no longer ours. This, you will understand, is the Christian religion-- the religion of atonement, of redemption and forgiveness. And there is nothing else like it under the sun!

Perhaps there is one more thing that we should take from this service today. We should carry with us, too, the high and firm resolve to do a little better in the future than we have in the past. Pascal once said: "Jesus Christ is in agony until the end of the world." Upton Sinclair once wrote that one of the greatest causes of His suffering in the garden was the vision of what some of His faithless children would do to Him in all the years to come. And so today His agony is heard in all the sins of our time, in our carelessness with God and the suffering of all the images of God throughout the world. There is no greater way to live than to hear in all the pain and agony and horror of our time the echo of His agony, to resolve to help wherever we can, and to hear above the roar and confusion of our mad world His voice again and again: "Fear not, my child, I have already traveled that road. On each step of the terrible way I have left for you a drop of my blood and the print of my eternal mercy. Come in repentance and faith to Me, my lost and lonely child, and the way will always be clear and straight and bright for you." There is nothing greater and nothing more that you can possibly ask of God and His Son, Jesus Christ, our suffering Lord. The Cross is now, and always, the sign of His agony for us and the sign of our joy in Him and our salvation.