

The best stories are often the ones where, despite great trials and suffering, the hero stays unwavering in their determination to fulfill the mission that's been given to them. It's why we are drawn to movies like *The Avengers*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Braveheart*, celebrate heroes of the faith like Jim Elliott and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and honor our own Fellowship crew serving at Exodus Ministries yesterday who pressed on with yard work even as the storms rolled in. There is no greater example of this, though, than the story found in the Gospels, the story of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

This morning we begin a new series in the Gospel of Luke called *Unwavering*. As we look forward to Easter two weeks from today, we're going to spend the next three Sundays looking at the arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus, and focus on his unwavering devotion to the mission his Father has sent him on, a mission to make a way for salvation and to give to us an example of how we should follow God. Jesus never took his eyes off the cross, and neither should we.

We begin, though, a little differently than we normally do on the first Sunday of the month. We usually celebrate Communion at the end of our service, but today I want to begin this message and this series with Communion. I do so because I believe it will put us in both the right setting and the right posture. It was immediately after this "last supper" with his disciples that the events we'll look at in this series took place, and I want us to be in the shoes of those closest to Jesus on that night. I also want us to take communion as a reminder of what this season is about, so that, if you are new to the faith or will be hearing the Easter story for the 50th time in your life, that we would all do so with fresh eyes and an open heart to be overwhelmed by the love, grace, and sacrifice Jesus poured out to purchase our salvation, and that we would see the risen Christ on Resurrection Sunday as a reminder that we too have been raised to a new life to live for God. (invite ushers, pass out and hold elements)

[Luke 22:14-15, 19-22] ¹⁴ And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵ And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. ¹⁶ For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God... ¹⁹ And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁰ And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. ²¹ But behold, the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table. ²² For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined."

The events of this meal have resounded throughout the history of the Church, and while we celebrate it monthly, I want to pause this morning and consider Jesus' words to a greater depth. Jesus began the meal by telling his friends how eagerly he wanted to eat the Passover with them; "with desire I have desired". Jesus wanted to **be with them** one more time before he began the arduous journey to the cross.

He also wanted to **prepare them** for what was to come, and to let them know it won't be a surprise. Jesus is in control and willingly goes to suffer on a cross. While he has addressed his suffering numerous times during his ministry, he once again reminds them of what's on the horizon. Jesus says he goes "as it has been determined". He is living out the mission the Father sent him on. What is about to happen is not an indication that the plan has gone awry. It's happening exactly as the

Father has laid it out. He wanted to **encourage them**. Jesus says he will eventually eat this meal again, so in their moment of despair when he is placed in a tomb, when all seems lost, perhaps they would remember there is coming a day when he will be alive and with them. And, finally, he wanted to **instruct them**. He speaks of a new covenant, one prophesied about by Jeremiah that includes this promise: **“For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”** Jesus explains that the breaking of his body and the shedding of his blood would inaugurate this new covenant, and he instructs them, and us, to celebrate this meal often to remember him, what he has done for us, and to look forward to his return. And so we do that together this morning.

Once the meal was over, the disciples questioned who would betray Jesus, argued over which of them was the greatest, and Peter was told by Jesus he would deny him three times. From there, Jesus led his disciples to the Mount of Olives, to a place called Gethsemane. It was a place frequented by Jesus, and its name means “olive press”. It is there where Jesus would be squeezed between the will of God and the will of man, a moment where he would have to choose between denying himself and preserving himself, a moment with the potential of wavering.

[Luke 22:39-46] ³⁹ And he came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. ⁴⁰ And when he came to the place, he said to them, “Pray that you may not enter into temptation.” ⁴¹ And he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, and knelt down and prayed, ⁴² saying, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.” ⁴³ And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. ⁴⁴ And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. ⁴⁵ And when he rose from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, “Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation.”

To remain unwavering requires preparation. I was reminded of this on Friday as I went out for a run...my first in quite a while. I had my path and goal in mind, but when the difficulty of cramping legs and burning lungs arrived, the temptation to stop proved too strong, and I wavered. I simply was not prepared and fell short of my goal. For Jesus and his disciples, the temptation to stop short would soon arrive, and the contrast between their preparation was stark. One’s spiritual fitness was being strengthened, while the others were atrophying.

Jesus tells his friends to pray so that they will not enter into temptation, the temptation to pursue their own will instead of God’s will. This exhortation encouraged two attitudes: anticipation and dependence. Jesus knows temptation is coming, and he knows they will need help to persevere through it, to remain unwavering. Unfortunately they do not heed his counsel. Luke tells us they went to sleep, but were doing so “out of sorrow”. Honestly, I don’t think I’d ever seen that before. It makes sense they were sorrowful. Jesus had told them one of them was to betray him, and he was to suffer. They likely left that upper room expecting that to happen soon. The grief had to be immense and perhaps, too much to bear, so they slept to get away from it. Unfortunately this would leave them ill-prepared for what was about to arrive, and the events of the next 24 hours would leave them in disarray and despair, worried more about self-preservation than anything else.

Jesus, on the other hand, takes a different approach. He is the model for what he encourages of disciples. He too needed to prepare for what was coming, and what we see here is one of the most

significant moments in all the Gospels. While we rightly focus on the cross and empty tomb during Easter, the battle was, at least partly, won here in this moment.

Jesus knelt down to pray. On the cusp of his suffering, he runs to the Father. He begins his prayer with “If you are willing.” Before he ever makes a request, he confesses his submission. He’s saying he will accept and live out whatever answer the Father gives him (don’t you wish your kids did that!) He continues with “Remove this cup from me.” He is not saying he is no longer interested in fulfilling the end result the Father has sent him for. He’s asking if there is any other way. And then he says a word that should be abundant in all our prayer vocabularies: nevertheless. He concludes by saying “not my will, but yours, be done.” **This is a prayer of unwavering dedication.** It is a proclamation of Jesus denying himself in order to live out the mission the Father has sent him to accomplish. This is Jesus keeping his eyes on the cross.

The Gospels don’t tell us if Jesus heard a “no”, or if silence from heaven gave him the answer. But we do know that his Father did not leave him to fend for himself. In the midst of his agony, where he sweat so profusely that it was like blood dripping on the ground, an angel from heaven appeared to strengthen Jesus. Be encouraged. God helps those who have given themselves for his purposes. He is in the perseverance business and he will strengthen and sustain any who would do what Jesus did and calls all of us to, to deny ourselves and pick up our crosses.

One of the greatest challenges of the Christian life is the prayer that seems unanswered, or the prayer that is answered, and the answer is “no”. There is perhaps nothing that tests our faith more. Many of you in this room are on your face asking for God to change something in your life right now. You are pleading with him to take something from you, to make something end, to cause something to start new. Or you may be tempted to go down a path that takes you far away from what God has for you. I want to encourage you to follow the example of Jesus and hang in there. You may not be able to see what God is up to. It may take years for you to see it. But follow the example of Jesus and trust that whatever the Father has, even if it’s a more difficult path, will be used by God to drive you into deeper intimacy with him and accomplish his will, for his glory and your blessing.

That’s what Jesus did in this moment. It was here that he made the decision to die for you. He asked that God take it away, that he find some other way to accomplish what he sent Jesus to do, but the answer he got was “no, this is the only way.” So Jesus got up from the ground, knowing what was coming, and he unwaveringly stepped into it in obedience and faithfulness to the Father and for our salvation. **This season rejoice in the fact that Jesus took “no” for an answer.**

When Jesus returned to his friends, he found them sleeping, and as he encouraged them to pray against temptation, temptation arrived. A mob, led by Judas, came to arrest Jesus under cover of night, with the intent to ultimately kill him. The difference in preparation between Jesus and his disciples immediately becomes apparent. We won’t read the passage, but starting in v47, the disciples see the threat and offer to fight. One disciple, the other Gospels tell us it’s Peter, reacts with violence by cutting off the right ear of the high priest’s servant. Jesus, though, immediately tells them to cease and proceeds to heal the man’s ear. While his disciples are seeking to preserve Jesus, he is resolute in what must take place, and even shows that by healing his enemy. That difference in response would continue, particularly for Peter.

[Luke 22:54-62] ⁵⁴ Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house, and Peter was following at a distance. ⁵⁵ And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them. ⁵⁶ Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, "This man also was with him." ⁵⁷ But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." ⁵⁸ And a little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not." ⁵⁹ And after an interval of about an hour still another insisted, saying, "Certainly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean." ⁶⁰ But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about." And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. ⁶¹ And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times." ⁶² And he went out and wept bitterly.

Just as Jesus told him would happen, Peter denies him three times. The temptation of self-preservation came again, and so too did Peter's failure. His denials grow in intensity. He first says he doesn't know Jesus personally, then says he has nothing to do with his work, and ultimately says he has no idea what or who they are talking about. As the rooster crows, Peter is confronted with the look of his Lord. We do not know the intent of the look but, knowing Jesus, it was likely compassionate. Regardless, Peter is overwhelmed with the shame of denying his Messiah and he flees weeping bitterly.

I thank God for Peter. He so often comes up short, and we have fun at his expense at times, but I believe God gave him to us to show us how we are prone to fail. Peter failed when temptation came, and while we may think we would have handled it differently, we must all ask ourselves how prepared we are to handle the temptation of self-preservation when it comes. Spiritual sleepiness leaves us vulnerable to wavering, and that is a pathway to deep regret and painful grief.

Temptation would also come again for Jesus. He would be given an out, an opportunity to stop this process and be free. Would he remain steadfast in living out the will of the Father?

[Luke 22:70-71] ⁷⁰ So they all said, "Are you the Son of God, then?" And he said to them, "You say that I am." ⁷¹ Then they said, "What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips."

Jesus' unwavering devotion to the Father's will was soon tested. In one of six trials in front of both Jewish and Roman officials, Jesus is asked the key question in all of this. If he wavers and denies his identity like Peter denied his, their case will have no merit, and he should be set free. **He will have preserved his life but failed in his mission.** But if he answers affirmatively, he will seal his fate. And while Jesus gives a somewhat nebulous answer of "You say that I am", it is enough to communicate he affirms what they are asking. He will ultimately wind up in front of the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, and be sentenced to death by crucifixion. A determined and heaven-strengthened Jesus does not waver when presented with the opportunity to end this. **While Peter denies his identity in order to save himself, Jesus confirms his identity in order to save everyone else.**

If you follow Jesus, you'll ultimately find yourself in Gethsemane. If you follow Jesus, you will end up where he was, and that includes a time of being squeezed. I believe each and every one of us will have a moment, or moments, there that will ask us to decide between our will and God's will, between an opportunity to preserve ourselves or deny ourselves. It may be around living out your God-given purpose. For those of you who are single, it may be around the decision to remain within the boundaries God sets for sex. Some of you may be ready to get out of your marriage but God is telling you to hang on. And in that Gethsemane moment, I want to encourage you to offer a Gethsemane prayer like Jesus prayed. An honest prayer that tells God what is on your heart, but a prayer that also includes a bold "nevertheless!", and a laying aside of your will.

But the only way we're going to be able to end a prayer that way is to know and trust the God who hears it and to believe that his will is superior to yours. And the only way you can remain unwavering is through utter dependence on God's mercy and grace. If the Son of God, the Savior of the world, needed the Father's help to persevere, so do you and I. And if God provided an angel to strengthen Jesus in his greatest time of need, we can be assured of his provision of strength for each of us. He wants to see you through it until the very end. But we will not do it perfectly, so...

When you waver, run to the cross. Jesus was unwavering when he went to the cross so that when we waver, we can go there too. The hero of the Bible is not some fictitious character who defeats super-villains. He is the God of the universe who gave his life for you to defeat sin and death, **your sin and your death**, so that you can be with him forever. He did it perfectly, unwaveringly, so you don't have to. Peter's response was to run from Jesus when the shame of his denials took root. Our response should be the opposite. When you fall, when you waver, there is only one place to go: the cross. It is there where your wavering was paid for. It is there where forgiveness is made possible, and it is there where we are given the strength to say, "Your will be done."