

February 18, 2018
 1st Sunday of Lent
 "The Garden of Gethsemane"

This sermon is based on *24 Hours That Changed the World* by Adam Hamilton. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009. See chapter 2.

I will only be brushing the surface of this meaningful book. I heartily recommend it for anyone who seeks a better understanding of Jesus' last day and all the significance it holds for Christians and the world.

Mark 14: 32-42, *New International Version*

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."

Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Couldn't you keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him.

Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

Late in the evening, on a Passover Thursday almost 2000 years ago, Jesus and his disciples finished their Seder meal with a hymn that is still sung today as part of the Seder. It is based partly on Psalm 118. This hymn may have had special meaning for Jesus. Hear these words and see if you can guess why:

Out of my distress I called on the LORD;
 the LORD answered me and set me in a broad place.

With the LORD on my side I do not fear.
 What can mortals do to me?...
 I was pushed hard, so that I was falling,
 but the LORD helped me.
 The LORD is my strength and my might;
 he has become my salvation...
 I shall not die, but I shall live,
 and recount the deeds of the LORD.

v. 5-6, 13-14, 17

From the guest room where they had their meal, the group walked out of the city gate of Jerusalem, through the Kidron Valley to the base of the Mount of Olives. Here there was a grove of olive trees called the Garden of Gethsemane. Somewhere among these trees there must have been an olive press, because this is what *Gethsemane* means. The garden imagery is probably important. Can you think of other meaningful Biblical gardens?

There is the Garden of Eden, where our life began. Later, Jesus would be buried in a garden. John tells us that when Mary sees him after his resurrection, she thinks he is the gardener. And in a description of God's Kingdom to come, the book of Revelation brings up images of a garden when it tells us:

On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit,
 yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of
 the nations. 22: 2

So ***maybe Jesus' presence in this garden at this time connects the overarching story at the beginning, the middle and the end.*** We began in a garden; the climax of Jesus' story took place in a garden; and in God's coming Kingdom, we will live with him in a garden.

Here, in the this garden, as Mark tells us in a few short verses, Jesus prayed to his Father in anguish.

"Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me.
 Yet not what I will, but what you will."

Luke tells us that so profound was his distress, that "his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground." (Luke 22: 44)

The picture of Jesus in anguish, pleading with God for his life, makes many of us uncomfortable. For some people, it invokes deep compassion and empathy. For other Christians, the idea of Jesus asking God to find another way, and remove the pain of the cross, seems to show weakness, or even a lack of faith. So why exactly was the perfect Son of God in anguish?

It could have been because once again, he was wrestling with the tempter. You remember that guy, the one who tried to derail Jesus' ministry before it even got started (Matthew 4: 1-11). We can imagine what the tempter would have to say in this situation:

"Are you sure you're *really* the Son of God? Maybe this has all really been about you?"

"You're throwing your life away! Think of all you could accomplish if you live, all the lives you'll touch!"

"You're just *imagining* God is sending you to the cross. God wouldn't *really* want his Son to suffer and die."

"There's no need for you to go through this torture and death. There's got to be another way, and if you live you'll figure out what it is."

"Run away! You've got time!"

Can you imagine the turmoil Jesus must have been experiencing? He could have avoided the crucifixion. What effort of will-power and love would it have taken to stay the course?

Another way to look at it is that ***Jesus was anguished because he knew the fate of Jerusalem.*** He knew that because of his death, most Jews would not believe he was the Messiah. They would continue to look for a military leader who would help them throw off the oppressing Roman Empire. And this was going to lead to disaster. As Jesus said after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem:

"If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."
Luke 19: 42-44

Jesus' prediction proved true. Just thirty years later, the people did find a man who led them to revolt against the Romans, and the Empire did not tolerate rebellion. From the year 66 to 73, the Romans completely crushed the Hebrew people. The city of Jerusalem was made a wasteland, the Temple was reduced to rubble, and over a million Jews and their supporters were killed. Jesus knew, as he prayed in the garden, that the city, the temple, and the people he loved would be destroyed, and his death would have something to do with that.

Finally, can we just allow Jesus to be human? This is the most obvious reason for his anguish.

What would you be feeling if you knew that within a few hours you would be tortured; publicly humiliated; and then subjected to one of the cruelest, most

inhuman and painful forms of capital punishment ever devised by human beings?
Hamilton, p. 41

It's hard for us to wrap our minds around what the church has always told us, through every age, that Jesus was fully divine, but also fully human. Any human being would be in deep terror and anguish about what they were going to endure. And as a human being, we can expect no less and no more from Jesus.

Which is probably why Jesus wanted his friends with him. As they came to Gethsemane, Jesus asked his disciples to, "Sit here while I pray." Then he took Peter, James and John a little farther, with the instruction, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch." He wanted his friends around him. We can empathize. Don't we, also, want to be with those we love at the most difficult times of our lives?

Once, I had to undergo a medical test I was worried about. I shared my concern with a friend, and to my surprise she announced she was going with me. She picked me up, gave me chocolate, sat with me during the wait, and delivered me home. It turned out to be nothing, but I can't tell you how grateful I was for her ministry of presence. What a gift to go through a difficult experience with the companionship of a friend.

Jesus didn't ask his friends for advice, help, or even encouragement. He just asked them to watch and wait with him.

Can you imagine his disappointment when he found them sleeping? He said to Peter, "...are you asleep? Couldn't you keep watch for one hour?" It reminds us of the fact that Jesus would face his trial alone. All those he loved would abandon him. He knew Judas would betray him. The disciples would all flee to save their own lives. And his beloved Peter would deny even knowing him. This was probably another source of his deep sorrow.

There is hope, though, in this story of betrayal, desertion and denial. The disciples, his closest friends, let Jesus down. But Jesus forgave them. When he rose again he celebrated with them. Despite their abandoning of Jesus, Jesus never abandoned them. We can draw comfort from this, that ***even when we let Jesus down, Jesus won't let us down.*** No matter our sin or errors, he is always ready to welcome us back into community with him. We may sin and fall away, but Jesus forgives and restores. He did it for the disciples, and we can trust he will do it for us.

Last point: ***we all have our own Gethsemanes.*** We have all, at some point, been anguished in our own garden as we pled with God. For health, for solutions, for hope, for ourselves and for loved ones, we have all prayed this prayer. There are dark places in every life where the only thing we can do is turn it over to God in a prayer of desperation and tears. When we get to that place, we can remember that Jesus has been there, so he understands; he will never fall asleep in his vigil with us; and redemption and resurrections will come. ***Because of Jesus' sacrifice of himself, we can trust that these dark nights will never have the last word in our lives.***

The dark night didn't have the last word in Jesus' life. In one day, by Friday evening, all would appear utterly hopeless to those who followed him. But Sunday was coming! And with it joy and new life they never even imagined...

So what is your Gethsemane? What struggles have you had with a tempter? What weakness do you cope with because you are only human? Who watches with you? And who do you trust for deliverance?

Jesus has been there, and understands. He is with you in it. He promises it will never be the last word for your life. Thanks be to God!