

REFLECTIONS



HOLY WEEK

Matthew 26:36-46

Then Jesus went with [his disciples] to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” 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.” 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? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Again he went away for the second time and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.

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GETHSEMANE

by
Norm Wright

Holy Week can become a blur as our minds tend to focus on the upcoming celebration of Easter. To prevent it from being a blur, some churches hold services throughout the week to keep their parishioners mindful of what led to making Easter such a significant Holy Day. Properly understood, the services during Holy Week serve as one continuous worship service that begins on Palm Sunday and culminates with Easter.

In many churches, the story of Christ's Passion, his suffering and death, is told twice during Holy Week, on Palm Sunday and on Good Friday. There is a great deal to ponder in its telling that some aspects of the events which took place can get lost on us. One such event is Jesus going with his disciples to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane (the Mount of Olives in Luke's account) which took place after the Last Supper and became the site of his arrest.

While Jesus going to a solitary place in the darkness of night to pray was a common feature of Jesus' prayer practice, his praying in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his arrest was not in keeping with it. In that case, he brings his disciples with him, minus Judas Iscariot. In particular, he brought his closest disciples, Peter, James, and John to be near him as he went a short distance from them to pray.

Some biblical scholars have suggested Jesus bringing his disciples along with him to the Garden of Gethsemane or to the Mount of Olives outside of Jerusalem's city walls was done to protect himself and his disciples and, if necessary, to make an escape through the dense foliage in the darkness of night. To give this notion some credibility, the Gospel of John's account of Jesus' arrest has Peter cutting off the ear of the high priest's slave, Malchus, with a sword presumably brought along for defending against an armed assault. Whether or not it was Jesus' intent to bring his disciples along for the purpose of escape, planning to do so would have been a rational response to the real danger that was clearly on Jesus' mind.

For me, the story of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane is a depiction of a human being struggling with a life and death decision. It was while meditating on this particular story that I began to understand that what is true about us is true about Jesus, and that what is true for Jesus is true for us. What makes this story so relevant is its importance not only for our understanding of Easter but also our understanding of what it means to be in the world but not of it.

In the liminality of that night's darkness, when the features of this world were muted, Jesus found himself seeking a way to be true to his calling and finding a way to be true to the faith our Father invested in him. While he preferred the obvious outcome of the predicament he faced would pass him by, Jesus resisted the temptation to fall prey to this world's manner to have his own way and save his life at the risk of forfeiting everything he stood for. Rather Jesus sought to fulfill God's original script of love for the world by redeeming it, no matter the personal cost to himself.

The dividing line between being in this world but not of it is simply this, the difference between seeking to pursue a way of one's own making or to seek and do the will of God in the world.

In various ways and to various degrees, we all encounter Gethsemane moments; moments of uncertainty, moments in which there is no apparent clear or good choice, moments that challenge us as children of God, and moments in which the way of this world entices us to flee or to fight. Jesus neither prepared to flee the moment or to fight it, but rather he faced and embraced it because, in the predicament he faced, there was no clear way to flee it or fight it and remain true to the son God called him to be.

This was not easy for Jesus. Jesus loved this life. Jesus loved his life.

In Matthew, the weight of the situation caused Jesus to throw himself to the ground. In Luke's account, we are told that Jesus perspires so much in his distress that his sweat drops to the ground like huge drops of blood. Jesus, out of faith, deferred the decision to his Father, our Father, because there was something in that moment that prohibited him from fleeing it, something that prohibited him from fighting it, something that allowed him to enter into it, and that something was love.

There are many things in this life we cannot avoid; situations in which the best way forward is not going around them but going through them. In the end, there was no way for Jesus to get around the predicament he faced him because it was not a matter of it simply being his predicament, it was a predicament facing all of humanity; a predicament brought about by the perennial desire to have things our way. Jesus could not run from it. Jesus could only face it and go through it out of love for the world of God's creating; a world created by and for love.

At this moment, let us pause to ponder that decisive moment which paved the way for God's love to wash over us.

JESUS I WILL PONDER NOW

***Jesus, I will ponder now on you holy passion;
with your Spirit me endow for such mediation.
Grant that I in love and faith may the image cherish
of your suffering, pain, and death that I may not perish.***

***Graciously my faith renew; help me bear my crosses,
learning humbleness from you, peace mid pain and losses.
May I give you love for Love! Hear me, O my Savior,
that I may in heaven above sing your praise forever.***

(Sigismund von Birken 1626-1681)