

April 5, 2020
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Mark 14:32-36 The Garden: Risking Temptation
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Mark 14:32-36 Common English Bible

Jesus and his disciples came to a place called Gethsemane. Jesus said to them, “Sit here while I pray.” He took Peter, James, and John along with him. He began to feel despair and was anxious. He said to them, “I’m very sad. It’s as if I’m dying. Stay here and keep alert.” Then he went a short distance farther and fell to the ground. He prayed that, if possible, he might be spared the time of suffering. He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible. Take this cup of suffering away from me. However—not what I want but what you want.”

Today we hear the story of the garden of Gethsemane. But, our scripture never mentioned a garden. In John’s Gospel Jesus goes to a place where there was a garden but it doesn’t mention Gethsemane (John 18:1). In Matthew and in Mark Jesus goes to Gethsemane but it doesn’t say it is a garden (Matthew 26:36, Mark 14:32). Gethsemane is Aramaic for oil press. Luke says that Jesus goes to the Mount of Olives. We have meshed all of those depictions together and Jesus goes to the garden of Gethsemane.¹

A garden is a place of beauty and life, fragrance and peace. Our own Sherry Houpt has been painting beautiful depictions of her garden. Many of you are posting pictures of flowers that you see on your walks around your neighborhood. When we see Jesus full of anguish on the night of his arrest, it doesn’t seem to fit that it happens in a garden. This is a place where Jesus suffers and Jesus prays. Jesus goes to a place of beauty to feel God’s peace. I have been reading Lori Gottlieb’s book, “Maybe you should talk to someone.” She says, “Peace. It does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble, or hard work. It means to be in the midst of those things and still be calm in your heart.”

In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus reminds us of the importance of prayer. I talked with the Confirmation kids not too long ago about prayer. We talked about how prayer helps us connect with God and others. We talked about how prayer helps us get better at listening. Prayer is seeking God and listening to God in the midst of everything else in our lives. I shared with the Confirmation kids that the first Methodist, John Wesley, said that prayer opens us up to or puts us in the way of grace because prayer is a continual openness to God’s grace and presence. It is paying attention to all the ways God speaks to us during the day.

I asked the Confirmation kids if prayer helps them get something that they really want? I gave them the example of a teacher passing out tests. You had not studied and the paper has already been graded. Does praying to get a good grade work? They all agreed no. We weren’t sure if prayer changes God but we agreed that prayer does change us. I am thankful that Jesus prays for himself at the garden of Gethsemane. It is important to pray for ourselves.

When we see Jesus suffering as he does in the garden of Gethsemane, it is as if Jesus is saying, “Let this cup pass from me. I don’t want to do this, but I know this is my vocation, I know this is what I have to do.” Today, we want to pray to let the cup pass. We are done. We are ready for life to get back to normal. We don’t want to see a world where so many die. In our darkest nights when we feel hopeless and afraid and alone, prayer surrounds us in the love of God. Prayer reminds us that we are not alone. Prayer opens us up to God’s grace.

I am also thankful that Jesus doesn’t go to the garden of Gethsemane alone. He takes with him Peter, James, and John. These are the men who have been with him since his time in Galilee. Peter, James, and John were among the first disciples called. They do fall asleep, but they don’t run away. They are there. When Jesus begins to feel despair and anxiety, he knows that he needs

¹ Levine, Amy-Jill. *Entering the Passion of Jesus*. Kindle page 132.

to reach out to people. Our reaching out to people now looks different than it has in the past. We aren't able to get coffee or have lunch and share what is going on in our lives, but we can call, we can text, we can see each other's faces online. It doesn't feel quite the same though and when we are able to safely be with each other again, there are going to be lots of hugs happening! I ache with the anticipation of those hugs with each of you.

Holy Week begins today. Gethsemane is the moment when a chain of events begins that cannot be halted. Once Jesus is taken into custody, there is no going back. We feel with Jesus the temptations that come when facing difficult circumstances. We want to run, we want to hide, we want to use whatever power we have to change things, to fight it, perhaps even to bargain with God. We are with the sleepy disciples who just can't grasp what is about to happen. Right now as we shelter in place, we want to figure ways we can cut the time shorter or bargain a way to make our situation more palatable.

Lent began with Ash Wednesday when we were marked with the sign of the cross and we heard the words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Repent, and believe the gospel." Lent is a 40 day journey that strips us down and in that rawness and in that openness, we are supposed to heal and put ourselves back together again. It is a time for us to face our fears, face our failures, and work on them. Lent is a time for us to ask questions and realize that there are not always answers. Lent is Jesus getting ready for suffering. But suffering needs to have an end date. When is this going to end? We need God's promise that suffering has an expiration date. We need to know that someday we won't suffer. We need to know that someday this COVID-19 will have a vaccine, or at least a treatment. We want our old world back again.

But instead of a cure, every day we wake up to news that things are getting much worse. Lent gives us permission to feel our feelings. Despair, confusion, anger. What does hope feel like when we know things will first get worse? How do we hold onto what life and resurrection feel like even in the midst of a season of death? First, we march through the dark and then we decide whether we are able to see the light.

This Lent we have talked about entering the passion as we have looked at the events of the last week of Jesus' life. Entering the Passion should give us courage. Courage to lament, courage to embrace righteous anger, courage to see the course to the end. A friend shared with me writer Mary Anne Radmacher's words that, "Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, 'I will try again tomorrow.'"

Entering the Passion should give us comfort as well, the comfort that comes from knowing that death is not the end of the story, and the comfort of knowing that the good news continues not just when people proclaim it, but when they enact it. We know that the cross was not the end of the story, that betrayal can be overcome, that justice does prevail, and that sacrifice can lead to redemption. We know that God gives life to the dead.

You know that I love writer and professor Kate Bowler. I highly recommend her book, "Everything Happens For a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved." She has been filming a video each day during Lent on her Instagram and social media. This week she said, "In Lent Jesus is getting ready to die. We're not made to be on this earth to suffer and to die. We're just made out of love. God made us out of sheer love. Not to teach us lessons through suffering. There is no deep why as to why this is happening. It is a terrible air-borne illness. We suffer because we are people and our bodies are glitchy. We suffer because this is not the end of the story and we are not there yet. The only suffering that is meant to be good in any way is God's because God comes to earth and understands how horrible it feels to be afraid for this long. Our suffering is

not a spiritual lesson, the only story here is that we are loved. God saves us and knows our lives inside out.”

Christianity doesn't have an answer to suffering, it has a story. A story that tells us that every single time we are scared, God is with us. A story that tells us that there is always hope, there is always joy, there is always good news. I want to challenge us today to think of some of the ways that this terrible situation has led to positive things. Positive things like using your car less, or having more time to work on projects. Positive things like the ways that you notice people helping each other more. When we notice the good stuff, it doesn't negate all the bad stuff, but taking time out of each day to have gratitude for the things that are going well helps us to feel better.

If you are tired, bless you. If you are scared, bless you. If you have a little bit extra, bless you. Go out and give something. We are doing it. We will find hope even though in the story of Christianity and the story of this country it will get worse before it gets better. As we wait for the worst of this horror to pass, may we remember Jesus praying in the garden and waiting for the soldiers to arrest him. May we hold each other in any way we can, until we are through this. May we find solace in prayer, just as Jesus did in the garden of Gethsemane. Amen.