

Gethsemane

TEXT: Luke 22:39-62

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on April 6, 2023 (Maundy Thursday)

Last Sunday, we descended the Mount of Olives with the joyful procession leading Jesus into Jerusalem and tonight we find Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, which lies at the base of the Mount of Olives, sweating blood in prayer. How did we get here?

Let's back up to remember why Jesus is in the city in the first place. It's Passover, which was one of the feasts that required every able-bodied Jew to go to the Temple in Jerusalem to celebrate, no matter where they lived. It's entirely likely that Jesus celebrated every Passover of his life in Jerusalem. It would have been odd if he didn't. So that's why there was the opportunity for the procession in Luke 19 at all. Passover takes preparation, and Jesus is coming to the city early for that purpose.

And now here we are in Luke 22, the last Passover Jesus will celebrate with his disciples will also be his last meal. He knows what is coming. He knows Judas has betrayed him to authorities. He knows the experience of the next 48 hours will break the disciples, including Peter. But, still, they bicker about who is the greatest among them. Still, they don't get it. So he washes their feet.

Then, after dinner, Jesus left the house and went back to the Mount of Olives, to the place where we are told it was his custom to go and pray, a garden amidst the olive groves—Gethsemane—a name that means “olive press.” The name was apt for this difficult, pressing night of prayer. Luke tells us that Jesus was in such great anguish during his prayer that his sweat became like great drops of blood.

For the record, this is actually a thing that can happen. Sweating drops of blood is called hematidrosis and, while rare, it's caused by intense fear or stress that causes the rupture of capillaries in the body, usually on or around the face. Leonardo Da Vinci wrote about soldiers sweating blood before battle. So, it is not inconceivable that Jesus did sweat blood. He knew what he was facing.

Crucifixion was not rare. Contemporary accounts describe the streets being lined with crosses. Crucifixion was a form of Roman terrorism in their colonies. Roman citizens could not be crucified—it was too barbaric. But those “other” non-Romans, they could be kept in line by seeing—up close and personal—what would happen should they give the authorities cause for concern. Would you sweat blood knowing that was coming? If soldiers sweat blood before battle, then you might well.

Remember also that, while people have debated Jesus' resurrection from the day it happened, no serious scholars—secular or religious—debate that Jesus himself was a real, historical person who was born somewhere between 6-4 BCE in the Roman colony of Palestine, was an influential rabbi, and was crucified by the Romans between 30-33 CE. The story of Jesus praying in the Garden just before his arrest is a portrait of a real rabbi, facing a real and deadly threat, calling on God for help.

I think it's a critical piece of the story because of what it teaches us about prayer. We all know that, earlier in his ministry, Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, and we have those words in the Lord's Prayer. But in Gethsemane, we have the Lord actually praying; and we can see in the description and hear in his words the fear, the stress, the anguish that his pressing him like the destiny of the olives in the trees above.

There are many things to learn about prayer from this story of Jesus praying, but there's one lesson I think is particularly relevant for today's Christians: The one who told his disciples in Mark 11:24 that they'll get whatever they ask for in prayer is, here in the garden, making the biggest ask of his life. “Take this cup away from me.” And God told him no.

We have come to equate the phrase: “answered prayer” with “God did what I asked.” If we don't get what we ask for, we claim God didn't answer our prayers—like God is some kind of vending machine that spits out what we want if we put the right amount of money in; and, if we don't get it, we kick the machine and say it isn't working. And we quote Mark 11:24 while doing it. “You have to do what I'm asking God, you promised!”

So, a fundamental thing this story teaches us is that “answered prayer” doesn’t mean we get what we ask for. Jesus—JESUS—didn’t get what he asked for; and it’s not like he was asking for a parking space. He was asking, literally, not to die. His faith was not deficient; neither was he demanding. All Jesus wanted was consideration for a Plan B—some less painful, less humiliating, less gruesome path to the same goal.

But he didn’t get a Plan B; he got angels to give him strength to deal with Plan A. Jesus had hardly finished his prayer when Judas showed up with the soldiers, marking Jesus as the one to arrest with a kiss.

Not getting what you ask for in the most important prayer of your life is the one thing Jesus and I have in common. I’ve told parts of this story before—maybe even this part; but it’s relevant here. It was Nov. 1, 1980. I had graduated from Bucknell in June and was back at home in Rhode Island, working at Brown for the year before my fiancé and I would be married.

I woke just before midnight to the sound of my mother screaming into the phone, “I can’t wake him up! I can’t wake him up!” I ran into my parents’ bedroom even as she ran downstairs to wait for the ambulance. My father lay still on the bed, his eyes open with the glassy stare of death. The death certificate would read the cause as a “massive myocardial infarction.” Heart attack. He was 47.

At that point in my life, I was still very much a biblical literalist. I knew what I was seeing. My father was not in that body. It was only a shell now, and that was obvious. But I also knew that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, along with the son of a widow and the daughter of a synagogue leader, and that you didn’t have to be Jesus to do it. Elijah and his successor Elisha in the Old Testament both had done it. Ask for anything, Jesus said, and I will do it.

So, I knelt beside the bed, put my hands on my father’s lifeless body and prayed for him to live. Not some resurrected life in heaven; the real life in the here and now; the life where I still needed a father in the flesh, the life where my mother still needed a husband, the life where his students still needed the guidance counselor who often opened our home to those who had been cast out of theirs, sometimes for days, months, or even years.

As I prayed, I could feel myself getting more anguished and desperate. I was in the olive press. My mother was still waiting downstairs for the ambulance. My brother was already married and living elsewhere. It was me, God, and the olive press; and the olive press was winning. And then, although alone in the room and still kneeling on the floor by the bed, I felt a hand on my shoulder and I heard a voice say, “No.” Immediately, the press let up. There was peace. There was love—only love. I gave him to God. I opened my eyes and my father’s glassy stare was gone; his eyes were closed.

It was many years later, when I told that story publicly, that my mother heard it for the first time. She ran to me afterwards and told me then that she had felt it, too. Downstairs, waiting for the ambulance, she had been almost hysterical in grief and anxiety—as I had heard in her voice on the phone. He couldn’t be gone! But then came a moment when she was flooded with peace for no real reason. She had never shared that with me before, just as I had never told her what happened upstairs.

Our Catholic friends made much of the fact that my father died basically at midnight between All Saints and All Souls on the Christian calendar. But what that night made me think about was Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane, when God had to tell even Jesus “No.” Neither of us got what we so desperately—and understandably—wanted. But we both got an extra helping of peace, love, and strength to help us bear the terrible “yes” that came with “Not my will, but thine be done.”

The dark times of Holy Week can be a balm for the soul for those who have been in the olive press; for those who have cried out in desperate prayer; for those who don’t know where to turn with their rage, grief, and fear; for those who cry out with Jesus from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!” Your faith was not/is not deficient. Those times are hard enough without adding to your grief by thinking it is a sign of divine disfavor. It’s not. God told Jesus, “No.” Jesus, in all his purity and faithfulness, has been where you are. He is there with you now.

I have yet to find anything that comes closer to representing the anguish of Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane than the version of it from Jesus Christ Superstar. So, I’ve asked Quinn to play the cut from the 1973 film to close this meditation and move us to the final moments of Jesus life. I invite you to sit and listen...and pray.