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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/16/2008, Palm Sunday
Matthew 26:14 – 27:66

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

And when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the mount of Olives.(Matthew 26:30, KJV)



Vincent Van Gogh, Olive Trees with Yellow Sky and Sun, 1889

It was near to Jerusalem, this Mount of Olives. And on this Mount, there was a garden called Gethsemane. There it was that a great struggle and a great suffering took place. Indeed, the fate of the world was decided that night, and it was decided in our favor, though, alas, at Christ's expense.

The story of our salvation begins in this garden, and well it should, for the story of our misery began in a garden. As often as we disobey the Lord, we drive ourselves onwards toward

exhaustion, thorns, and thistles, and betrayal of one another, as when Adam accuses everyone in sight save only himself:

The woman whom *thou* gavest to be with me, *she* gave me of the tree, and I did eat.(Genesis 3:12, KJV)

Well, this night, in the Garden of Gethsemane, commences the comeback trail for our human race. This night, in the garden, One of us shall battle

through to victory, and when he does so, we shall have found the One around whom to rally in the great battle against sin, death, and the devil.

Gethsemane is the whole passion of our Lord writ small and intimate. In that garden, Jesus knew agony – not agony of body, but of soul, which is a deep suffering indeed. In that garden, Jesus knew abandonment. It was not a cruel abandonment, but rather a sleepy one. Jesus had desired that his closest friends should watch and pray with him, but they let him down. In the end, the only ones to witness this great combat were the heavenly Father and Holy Spirit. As for Peter, James, and John – well, let them sleep on. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. And in this garden, Jesus found submission to the will of God – a path of submission he then followed all the way to the cross and to his final breath.

The story of Gethsemane is an awfully important story for a pastor and for each of us. How many times have I found myself at the sick bed speaking of Gethsemane? If that one lying in the bed should fear the path ahead, well, naturally so. Our Maker has not given us a heart of stone, but a living, feeling heart that can rejoice at the good and tremble at the bad. And if Jesus can tremble in Gethsemane, all the way to sweat falling from him like great drops of blood, then you too, my brothers and sisters, have the right to tremble. It does not reflect badly on your faith. You have the good company of your Lord and Saviour himself.

Oh, how many times I have found myself speaking across this communion rail to the penitent, or speaking in my pastor's study to someone filled with regret or lacking confidence for the path ahead. It helps us, I say, to remember the something of the subjective life of Christ as we find it on display in Gethsemane? Ancient heretics used to claim that the humanity of Jesus was but a ruse, that, being divine, he

could not know anything of the sorrows and pains of human life. But such heresy is to be very much regretted. It has not yet reached the depths and the beauty of our faith, which is this: that in Jesus, the divine has become one of us, subject to the same sorrows and temptations each of us knows. In Christ, the divine has become capable of agony, both agony of body and agony of soul.

This is a precious story. Each element of it is worth pondering. To begin, take the mere fact that Jesus is in a garden in the nighttime. The setting on the Mount of Olives puts me in mind of Vincent Van Gogh's glorious painting "Olive Trees with Yellow Sky and Sun," which he painted in 1889, *except* that for Jesus the sky is not yellow, nor is the sun. We can imagine the olive trees in that garden to be strong and swirling as Van Gogh would paint them, but it is nighttime, and in the nighttime, those trees can only make the world even darker for Jesus. He has left behind the upper room where he celebrated the Last Supper. He has left behind the warmth and the candles or torches of that room. Now it is late and dark. If there should be moonlight that night, it is hard for that cool light to penetrate the limbs of the olive trees. Jesus prays in darkness – a dark prelude to that perplexing darkness at noon, when Jesus is crucified and the sun turns away its rays as if in grief at the sight of the death of its Maker. Yea, the darkness of Gethsemane is a prelude to the even greater darkness of the tomb – an absolute darkness soon to envelope our Lord.

Imagine the grief and the terror breaking upon Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Three times he is driven to his knees, as if the threefold temptations of Satan in the wilderness have broken upon him again, though even more fiercely this time. Back there in the desert, he had calmly declined all this world's nations and the glory thereof. But now, the

spurned glory and the power of the nations are about to break upon him. He could have had it all! Now, he has nothing. Even birds of the air have their nests and foxes their holes, but Jesus has nowhere to lay his head. He has reached Gethsemane as a poor man, and he knows that time is running out. He will never be rich. At least he will never be rich as the world knows wealth.

Maybe Jesus had hoped that one day he would marry and settle down. He is still young. But in Gethsemane, he knows that that is all behind him now. Time has run out. Life has been too short for him. He seems not to have known love and marriage. Even his disciples have amounted to a rather sorry lot – fickle and uncomprehending, sleepy and in the end, cowardly.

What has he accomplished? His past amounts to a thousand, thousand lost opportunities. Who could blame him for regretting the good things of life he will not know? They could well press on him there in Gethsemane.

So, his past is the stuff of lost opportunities and modest accomplishments. That is bad enough. But the future is much worse. It is to be short and terrifying.

I do not think it unbecoming of Jesus to imagine that when he prayed that he might be spared “the cup,” he was praying in dread at the suffering at hand for him. He has warned his disciples again and again that he will suffer, even die on the cross. Well, such a passion prediction is no longer some yon distant event, but is right at hand!

In the Garden of Gethsemane, we find an example of One of us praying through to victory. And so, at the end of each prayer session, Jesus ends his prayer as a Christian must always end our prayer: “Nonetheless, not my will, but thine be done.”

And yet, let us not hasten by the substance of the prayer. Jesus prays for that which is really on his heart: he wants to be spared the cup. He does not try to anticipate the kind of prayer that he thinks would be pleasing to his heavenly Father, but actually asks the thing he desires:

My father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.

Like the child he is, and we must ever strive to be, he brings his request to his heavenly Father. Not some theoretical request, not some ideal request, but the thing that is actually on his heart: Let this cup pass from me!

Somehow, in the night of prayer, Jesus found new strength for the path ahead of him. Henceforth, he goes calmly to greet the soldiers, Pilate, and his death. In his night of prayer, we can well imagine Jesus arriving at two convictions — convictions worthy of being held by you and me too: First, that his heavenly Father meant for him to walk the *path of love* no matter how awful and frightening that path might be. Let love be your guide. And second, that path of love will turn out okay in the end. On this side, there is the best kind of life available to us, and on the other side, there is resurrection.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, the Apostle teaches us the why and the wherefore of Jesus’ victory in Gethsemane. Jesus did not run away from that Garden, but calmly met the soldiers who led him to cross because of his “joy.” Only this joy is not joy for himself, but joy in you:

²Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.(Hebrews 12:2, KJV)

This is how dear you are to Jesus. For your sake, Jesus endured the agony of soul we find in Gethsemane. For your sake, Jesus endured the agony of body we find on Calvary. And for your sake, he is risen

again, to watch over you, to guide you in a life of love, and to bring you at last to his kingdom, where, with the Father and the Spirit, he rules forever, world without end. Amen.