

Agony is not Defeat

Luke 22: 39 - 53

After they sang a hymn, closing out his Passover meal with his disciples, “He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives (*Luke 22: 39*).” *As was his custom*. The Mount of Olives was a place very familiar to Jesus, a place that he went frequently enough that the gospel writer records that this was his custom. The Mount of Olives rises to the east of the city of Jerusalem, overlooking the temple mount. In the time of Jesus, it was largely planted with Olive Trees, something that continues to this day. And at the base of the mountain is a place called Gethsemane, which translated means Olive Press. John’s gospel identifies it as a garden, which we must remember the for the most part, a garden in Jesus’ day would not be an ornamental place of beauty. Water was too scarce, food was too hard to grow, so a garden often referred to a vineyard or grove of trees, such as olives.

Olive trees were symbolically important in the Bible times. It takes approximately 20 years to grow a fully productive olive tree, which is how it was done in Biblical times. In other words, you don’t plant an olive tree for your own benefit, but for your children and grandchildren, considering that the average life span was significantly shorter than we have today. Is it any wonder that the olive tree and its oil were used as signs of hope for the future of the nation: kings are anointed with olive oil, a dove brings back an olive branch to Noah on the ark to signal that the waters were subsiding and life would begin again, the olive oil burned in the temple lamps, remembered particularly in the Jewish feast of lights, or what we know as Hanukah. But economically, the olive tree was equally important. Following the harvest, olives were crushed to create olive oil – the first pressing was generally used for eating/consuming and for anointing. The remains from an initial crushing would be crushed again, producing a lesser quality that was used for household lamps, and then what was left after that was used in the manufacturing of soap. One of factors that make the olive tree so economically viable is their incredible root systems which continue to feed the tree’s production of olives for 1,000 years or more. Trees can actually live for far longer, and today in the Garden of Gethsemane, there are a few trees that are estimated to be 2,000 years old, and so they were there on that fateful night when Jesus comes to the base of the Mt. of Olives to pray.

Gethsemane: the place of the olive press, the place of crushing. As Jesus came to the garden, imagine the crushing pressure that he was carrying on his shoulders. He was looking ahead to what he knew was going to be his most difficult hours, a time of excruciating pain and unbearable suffering. He was looking ahead knowing that he would soon be abandoned, and his time there in the garden was only a prelude to what was about to happen. The disciples that went with him could hardly stay awake and be in prayer themselves. There he was alone, asking only that his followers would stay awake for a single hour and pray, as Jesus asks them, that they will not give into the trials and temptations that they are about to face.

Gethsemane: the place of fervent, agonizing prayer. John makes it a point of reminding his readers that this was a garden, intentionally calling his readers to connect with an earlier garden – Eden. Eden was paradise; it was without pain or suffering, it was without agony. It had only one limitation – do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Jesus, referred to as the new Adam, the one who would reverse the curse of Eden, was now faced with a potentially

game-changing temptation: leave it all behind, protect yourself, and abandon the plan. Jesus' agony begins with temptation. Look at the geography. Jesus was in a perfect place to leave the city and go into hiding in an outlying village or even in the wilderness. If we believe that Jesus was fully human, doesn't it make perfect sense? What person would not be tempted to turn away from humiliation, torture, and death? Would Jesus be a repeat of Adam, or a new Adam who chose the right way? This is a temptation that he obviously agonized over as he prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me." His cry was not to a distant, uncaring parental figure, but to one whom Jesus knew intimately, using the Aramaic term Abba, what we might translate as Papa or Daddy.

But perhaps there was another, more important reason for the agony that Jesus was suffering in these painful hours. Looking to the west from the garden, the city of Jerusalem with its magnificent temple rose up before him. Only a few days before, as Jesus rode into the city from this same mountain from a location now marked by this small chapel, he had wept over the city saying, *(as recorded in Luke 19: 42 – 44)*

"If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God."

Now, as he prayed, he may very well have been agonizing over what he knew would be a painful and eventually destructive path that his beloved, holy city would take. He knew they would choose a way of violence and war, of seeking to gain power over others. It would take only a few hours for their first show of this when the people are asked to choose between him and Barabbas. But he was also prophesying what was to come: a siege by the Roman armies in 68 – 70 A.D. after a Jewish zealot uprising. The city would be leveled, and the beloved temple where the sacrifices were made, where they atoned for their sins, and where the Jewish people felt especially close to God, would be destroyed never to be rebuilt again. Like some mourn today the loss of the temple at the Western Wall, Jesus was mourning not the loss of a building, but the loss of a relationship that would continue if the people refused to embrace the ways of peace, the ways of love and hope: the ways of God. Jesus' heart was aching for the people he loved and their inability to fully comprehend what God was doing for them. It is an aching that should be in every Christian's heart as we see countless numbers of people turning their back on the one who could truly make a difference in their lives. Jesus' agony should be ours.

We cannot equate Jesus' agony with defeat, as he completes his prayer with the words, "But not my will, but yours." Jesus knew that the will of God was paramount, that the salvation plan was central. Gethsemane, a place that Jesus customarily went, was more than a place of crushing: it was a place of anointing, and this was the hour that would anoint Jesus as the true savior of the world. It was a place of enlightenment, that in the darkest hours, the light of hope that is Jesus would burn its brightest. It was a place of cleansing, as the sacrificial death that Jesus was about to undergo would be the means for the washing away of our sins. The olive oil – an oil of anointing, an oil of illumination, an oil of cleansing – a symbol of Jesus' passion. What we see

in Gethsemane is that Jesus does not follow the same pathway as Adam and Eve – he does not give in to the temptation, he is not broken by the pressure like a clay jar. Rather he stands fast, and in so doing, brings true freedom for all – freedom from sin, freedom from death, freedom to live!

There was little time for Jesus to reflect with his disciples about his time of prayer, for as he rejoins his disciples, Judas comes with the cohort of temple guards to arrest Jesus. Even before they flee, the disciples abandon the principles of love, grace, forgiveness and peace that Jesus had taught them and shown them. One of the disciples, identified as Simon Peter in John's gospel but not the others, draws a sword and cuts off the ear of Malchus, a slave of the high priest, and in his final miracle, Jesus heals the slave – one who came out to arrest him. Why he is mentioned by name we can only speculate, but perhaps he became a follower of Jesus known to the early church.

Jesus came to love, to heal, to forgive, to save. No amount of agony, no personal pain or spiritual anguish would keep him from his appointed task. This was God's plan, and nothing would stand in Jesus' way of doing the will of the one he knew as Abba.