

The Garden In Between

Good Friday Message, April 10, 2020

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Life can be upended in an instant. One moment we are coasting along, business as usual, going about our daily routines and schedules when suddenly, nothing will ever be the same again. The corona virus is a perfect example of that.

Thousands of lives lost so far. Many more sickened. We are anxious, afraid, wondering if we'll catch it. We worry about our families catching it. We are afraid if we do catch it will it be the end of life as we know it. Job descriptions are being re-written or perhaps erased. Things as mundane as going to the grocery store have turned into hazardous, covert operations. Weddings, funerals, graduations postponed or canceled. What we thought was sacred and set in stone has been smashed to pieces and lays before and we wonder how we will put the pieces back together.

That is what happened this very night, Good Friday, so many years ago.

Just one week before this, the road seemed so very clear. The air is filled with shouts of praise as the people cry Hosanna! Cloaks are spread on the road and palms waved in the air as Jesus, on a donkey, rides into Jerusalem for Passover.

With him are twelve trusted, triumphant, travelling companions. Twelve who were personally selected and invited by Jesus to follow him as his disciples. They have been by his side the better part of the last three years of his earthly ministry and witnessed countless miraculous acts

And they watch him throughout the week teaching and preaching to crowds of apt listeners. Luke tells us each day Jesus was teaching at the temple, and each evening he went out to spend the night on the Hill called the Mount of Olives, and all the people came early in the morning to hear him at the temple. Luke 22:37

But now, just days later, a shroud of darkness begins to descend. One already fled the table where Jesus and his disciples shared the Lord's Supper. Overcome by evil, Judas is on his way to betray Jesus' location to the Jewish authorities, information he sold for 30 pieces of silver. The remaining eleven leave the Upper Room and pass through the city with Jesus who leads them from the Passover table to a garden.

Often, we think of gardens as lush, colorful places, full of things pleasing to the eye and good to eat. The Garden of Eden was. God's perfect dwelling place created for us to live in perfect harmony with him. A relationship we ruined when we allowed evil to infect us with the virus of sin - convincing us to put our will before God's. And so, we were quarantined – banned from the Garden and forbidden to enter again until the sickness of sin is cured.

Gethsemane, where we find Jesus now, is not lush or particularly pleasing to the eye. It is a garden full of twisted olive trees. It is where Jesus asks his disciples to wait as he steps away from them to pray.

I imagine his disciples are confused. Weren't they just celebrating Passover? Celebrating that it was God's Mercy and Grace that delivered their people from bondage? And now here is their leader, their teacher, their mentor, their friend in obvious deep distress. But isn't he the one to overthrow their oppressors? Isn't he the one to take back the Kingdom and deliver them from bondage? They are not just confused but afraid. Are those drops of blood on his forehead? Are those tears running down his face? What is happening? Why is this happening? This isn't at all what they expected. This was not the plan.

Why? When things get up-ended and we find ourselves in a garden of darkness and despair, we ask: "why?" When the diagnosis is dire, we ask why? When our spouse says good-bye...why? The voice on the other end of the phone says: I'm sorry to tell you this and we cry out: "Why God? Why is this happening? And can it please just not, God? If it's possible can it please just not happen this way?"

Jesus asks this very same question. In this garden of twisted trees Jesus falls to his knees and prays: "the hour might pass from him: Abba Father, he said, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me." Mark 14:35

In the next few hours Jesus humanity, his human life as he knows it, will be over. He already knows he has been betrayed. That soon he will be arrested. He is fully aware he will be beaten till his body is all but broken. He will be put on trial 6 different times before corrupt authorities and unjustly declared guilty at each one. He knows that. Knows he will be humiliated, that a spikey crown woven of thorns will be pressed onto his head, a cross will be hoisted on his back, he will be paraded through the streets before people who just a few days ago shouted Hosanna and are now hurling insults. Our Lord and Savior knows he will be stretched out on that cross and nails will be pounded through his body to hold it in place, and for six hours will experience the most horrific form of execution ever devised. And he knows, on that cross, at the peak of his suffering, darkness will descend, not just on his life but over the whole land. Jesus knows the cup he is asked to drink, overflowing with all the sin that has come before and is still to come will cause God to turn away from him. And in that moment, he knows his humanity will cause him to cry out: "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?" He knows all of this...and yet.

Yet – a very different "y" word. As he prays 'why God must I drink this cup?' - Jesus answers his own question with obedience, trust and love. "Yet, not what I will, but what you will." Mark 14:36

Jesus decision, in this garden, to go to the cross for us is an offering of love higher, wider, deeper and longer than we can ever imagine. A decision which offers us the cure for the virus of sin that quarantined us from God's Holy Garden in the first place.

This up-ended garden we are in right now, infested with this frightening virus, seems so very dark. The fear of all the unknowns is overwhelming and all we want is for God to take it all

away. How do we find the strength to say, yes, this virus is vicious, and yet? We make the decision to remember Jesus is in this garden too. He knows and understands what we feel. Yes, this virus is terrifying, yet every day we can make the decision to pray for people around us, our family, friends, first responders, everyone! This virus effects everyone. Every day we may feel hopeless, yet we are not helpless. There ways to reach out and touch people without physical contact, with a phone call or a face time or a handwritten note. We can make masks, make meals, donate money. We can offer words of encouragement and love.

How did Jesus find the strength to say “and yet”?

Even though he knows there is great suffering in store for him on the cross, there is something else Jesus, as God, knows. Something that the disciples don't know, the Sanhedrin doesn't know, King Herod doesn't know, Pontius Pilate doesn't know. Jesus knows there is another garden waiting for him and for us. The Bible begins with Genesis and the Garden of Eden and it ends, as written in the Book of Revelation, with Eden restored. A garden God wants available to us to dwell with him for all eternity. A place where God ‘will wipe every tear from our eyes and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.’ We often think Jesus won the battle when he walked out of the tomb. But I think he won the battle that night in this garden in between, the Garden of Gethsemane, when he decided to stand up and walk toward the cross. And because he did, we forever have access to God's beautiful garden in heaven.

When all we want is God to make it all go away, remember that was what Jesus wanted too. And yet, he chose to stand firm and say: “God, not my will but your will be done.”

We can choose to say it too.

Amen