

Gethsemane

(on video, somewhere on the snowy Batona Trail)

When Dianna and I visited Israel, I remember a moment that has since become very significant to me. We were on a little boat in the Sea of Galilee – the same area where Jesus calmed a storm, and walked on water... the place where the miraculous catch of fish took place, near the area where Peter was restored after his denial of Jesus... so, there was already a lot of history to try and take in. Plus, it was simply beautiful!

But our guide had us all look out to the northwest, an area where the mountains ended right at the edge of sea. There was one mountain out there that kind of stood alone. It was easy to spot it when she pointed it out. She then told us that the traditional name of that mountain, a name that was apparently very ancient, was ‘the Lonely Place’.

In the very first chapter of the Gospel of Mark, in verse 35, we read these words: *“In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there.”* That word that is translated ‘secluded’ (or ‘solitary’, or ‘deserted’ in some other translations) is the same word as the name of that mountain we were looking at – and so, our guide told us, it is entirely possible that Mark’s reference was not just abstract, it wasn’t simply a way of saying “it was Jesus’ practice to get away from it all” every morning, but actually Mark is telling us that he went *to that very place*, i.e., to *that* mountain. “Lonely Place Mountain”. . . Every morning, when he was in that region of Galilee near Capernaum, he would go to this special place. And he would pray there.

There are a couple of other places where we read similar things in the gospels about Jesus’ prayer life. In Matthew 14:23, it says that “Jesus went to the mountain” to pray. This was in that same area that Mark referred to. And this was just after the feeding of the 5,000 and just before he crossed over the Sea of Galilee - taking the message into non-Jewish lands for the first time.

In Luke 6: 12 we read” “It was at this time that He went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God.” The next day he began calling the 12 Disciples.

We find then again, and again – especially centered around times when significant ministry or changes were about to happen, that Jesus prepared himself by praying. And it seems that whenever possible, he prayed in a place that had special meaning to him. His ‘lonely place’... his ‘quiet place’.

That’s why I’m out here right now... I’m somewhere on the Batona Trail in the Brendan T. Byrne State Forest. For about the past 10 years, mostly on Monday afternoons, this place has been one of **my** most frequently visited ‘lonely places’. I made an estimate this week, conservatively, that I’ve walked about 1600 miles in the past 10 years on the trails in these three places. This is very special to me. And this is, for me, holy ground.

This is where I come to be still and know that God is God. This is where I pray for myself, and my family, and this is where I pray for you. Over the past 10 years, I know, some of those prayer times have been very joyful, and other times they’ve been kind of sad. I’ve been here before and after some important things have happened in ministry, and I’ve walked out here in times when I’ve had absolutely no idea what to do next.

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It's a place where I feel that I can be completely honest before God, and you know, no matter what has been going on in my life, no matter how stupid a decision might have been, or how bad I messed something up, I've never thought, "Oh, I can't go there *today*". I can't face God today. Because I know this is a place of grace, it's where I *know* I can always 'meet with God'.

Jesus had some special places like this. The "Lonely Place" was just one of them. But maybe the most important one of all is the one we're going to look at today, on this journey we're taking together called "24 Hours that Changed the World". Let's go together then, to Gethsemane...

[End video]

Mark 14: 22 - 42

³² They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray."³³ He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled.³⁴ "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."

³⁵ Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him.³⁶ "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

³⁷ Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour?"³⁸ Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

³⁹ Once more he went away and prayed the same thing.⁴⁰ When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him.

⁴¹ Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners."⁴² Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

The Disciples have just finished their Passover meal. Their heads were spinning from the strange events they had seen and heard – this was not like any Passover they had ever experienced! It was all going normally, remembering the Deliverance of God's people from Egypt, remembering how the blood of a lamb caused the Angel of Death to 'pass over' the homes of the Hebrews, and a nation was born.

But then Jesus washed their feet. That was confusing enough in itself; how could this man who had convinced them all that he was the long awaited Messiah, their *Deliverer*; how could this man do the work of a mere servant? But that wasn't the end...then Jesus told them that one of *them*, one of the *inner circle* was going to betray him. He said, too, that all of the rest of them would abandon him.

And then, to completely finish them off, he picked up some bread left from the meal, and broke it, and said, "This is my body... broken for you." After that a cup...and again, mysterious words: "This is *my* blood...shed for you. The cup of the Covenant." What could this mean?

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The Scriptures say that next they ‘sang a hymn and went to the Mount of Olives’. The hymn that they sang was called the *Hillel*, drawn from passages in Psalm 115 – 118, its still sung today at the close of a Seder.

Some of the words of those Psalms include this passage from Psalm 116: 3

*The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me;
I was overcome by distress and sorrow.*

Same Psalm, vs. 12 – 15

What shall I return to the LORD for all his goodness to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD. I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people. Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of those faithful to him.

These are significant passages, because they set the tone for the night. These were the Scriptures that were in the forefront of Jesus’ mind on this amazing night.

Jesus was well acquainted with the Psalms, and the assumption would be that in quoting a portion of a Psalm, Jesus was referencing the entire writing: its thoughts and conclusions. This is a very significant thing as that knowledge can completely change our perception of some of the events of this last week.

I know many of our Lenten small groups spent some time discussing our ideas and thoughts concerning what exactly Jesus was agonizing about in the Garden of Gethsemane. Let me share with you a short passage from Adam Hamilton’s book, 24 Hours That Changed the World:

While we speak of Jesus bearing the sins of the world on the cross, the idea is not that the Father literally covered Jesus with the world’s sins. The idea is that the punishment those sins merited was voluntarily taken by Jesus on the cross (i.e., he suffered for sins he did not commit) in order to reconcile us to God. There was no reason for the Father to turn away. This was, in fact, the greatest act of sacrificial love imaginable and part of God’s own plan. God did not look away but instead looked with love and anguish at the suffering of his Son. God was grieved by it, seeing in the suffering and death of Jesus his Son’s effort to draw the world to God. By watching this act, the Father joined in the suffering of the Son during those hours on the cross.” (p. 38)

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For some folk in our groups I know this idea that God the Father did not turn away from Jesus on the Cross, is uncomfortable. Many of us have been taught that God is 'unable to look on sin' and so, having 'placed the sin of the world on Jesus', God *must* have turned away from him. But Hamilton is offering a different view, and really, a more Biblical one. He says, There was no need for God to 'look away' as Jesus was voluntarily taking on the punishment merited by our sins. Because this was God's plan of Redemption... and so, he writes: "*God did not look away but instead looked with love and anguish at the suffering of his Son ... By watching this act, the Father joined in the suffering of the Son during those hours on the cross.*"

The only Scripture that people point to in supporting the idea that "God abandoned Jesus on the Cross" comes from Jesus' cry on the Cross. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

But remember what I said about the Psalms? Quoting one part of a Psalm is, in effect, summoning the entire passage... and in fact, that cry of dereliction is not only a passage from a Psalm, it is the very first verse of Psalm 22. It's like the "Title of that Psalm". This is, obviously a messianic Psalm, and as you read it, you can understand why it would be on Jesus' heart and mind while on the Cross. It reads as if the writer was present at the Crucifixion.

Listen to a few verses from Psalm 22

⁶ *But I am a worm, not a human being;
I am scorned by everyone, despised by the people.*
⁷ *All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.*
⁸ *"He trusts in the Lord," they say,
"let the Lord rescue him.
Let him deliver him,
since he delights in him."*

¹⁴ *I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted within me.*
¹⁵ *My mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
you lay me in the dust of death.*
¹⁶ *Dogs surround me,
a pack of villains encircles me;*

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they pierce my hands and my feet.
¹⁷ *All my bones are on display;*
people stare and gloat over me.
¹⁸ *They divide my clothes among them*
and cast lots for my garment.

So this Psalm identifies the agony of someone who is suffering – perhaps even on a Cross, even though this method of execution had not yet been invented at the time of the writing of the Psalm! The thing is, however, that this Psalm concludes with a statement of trust in God's presence:

²⁴ For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one;

he has not hidden his face from him

but has listened to his cry for help.

²⁵ From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly;

before those who fear you I will fulfill my vows.

I think this is significant because it gives us a different picture of this night in Gethsemane. We don't need to look at Jesus as an exception to Scripture promises such as Romans 8, "*Nothing* can separate us from the love of God". *He wasn't* separated. God the Father was *with* Jesus in that garden. God the Father was participating in our redemption, not turning away.

If that is accurate, then, the *absence* of the Father was not the cause for Jesus' extreme sorrow, for his agony, for 'sweat that seemed like drops of blood' that night. What was it?

Of course, we can only guess. The obvious factor is simply that Jesus was, after all, human. He was the word made *flesh*. And it is certainly not a sign of cowardice for anyone to recoil from the most brutal form of capital punishment ever designed. It is not a sign of faithlessness to have doubts as to whether or not this path that was becoming more and more obvious, leading to a Cross...wondering, was this *really* God's will? Is it necessary?

I think Hamilton brings up a powerful possibility in addition to that one... in looking at Jesus (as Paul does) as 'the second Adam', there is significance, he suggests, in Jesus being in a *Garden*

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on this night. Perhaps Jesus' agony came from another bout of wrestling with Satan. Long ago, in the *first* Garden, Adam and Eve were tempted with basically, *one* question: "Your will or God's?" who is going to be in control?

And their failure in that one test, called 'the Fall' in Christian theology, led to the need for Jesus' coming. It led to our need for Redemption. And perhaps there, in that Garden as Jesus considered the *same* temptation, Jesus wrestling with Satan's doubts – "Is this *really* what God wants?" "Think about all the good you could do by staying here for awhile longer... do you really want to leave this work to those disciples – look, they can't even stay awake! Is this suffering really necessary?"

But this time, Jesus, the second Adam, prevailed.

His answer to all the doubts, his answer to the pain, his answer to the things that he understood and the things that, as a *human* he was unable to know...the answer for all was the same. "Abba, Father...Not my will, but yours be done."

The final prayer of Christian maturity comes when we are able to pray those words with Jesus in every circumstance. In decisions about our future – What will honor God? In our finances, in dealing with trouble and enemies, insults, loss, success, motivation, sickness, health, plenty or want... "Not my will, but yours be done."

I think that in all of those prayer times, whether Jesus was up on "The Lonely Place Mountain" or out in the Desert Wilderness, or praying in one of his favorite places – an olive grove called "Olive Press" (or, as we've come to know it, Gethsemane) the crux of all those prayer times has been a time of earnestly seeking the will of God the Father. For every circumstance of his life and ministry. And then asking for the courage to act on that will without wavering.

In my quiet place, my sacred places, that's what I pray for, too. I have a long way to go before those battles will be won. But I'm fighting.

There is a prayer that was written by John Wesley, back in 1780. It concludes a service of self examination and Covenant, one that we do here on a regular basis on New Year's Eve. We've

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included a copy of this prayer in your bulletins this morning, with the language updated a bit. It is a prayer that, if we're honest, we all will pray with mixed feelings. Because some of these requests are hard! And if we're really honest, we'll probably have to admit that we'd just as soon some of these petitions would *not* happen.

But as we continue to pray it, we learn from Jesus' example... and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we will one day be conformed completely to the image of our Lord. And we will see this prayer fulfilled.

Would you join me in praying Wesley's Covenant Prayer?

Covenant Prayer

Adapted from John Wesley's Covenant Service, 1780

I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what you will, place me with whom you will.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be put to work for you or set aside for you,
praised for you or criticized for you.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and fully surrender all things to your hope and service.
And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
you are mine, and I am yours.
So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be made also in heaven.
Amen.