

“In the Garden”

Mark 14:26-52

During these Wednesdays that lead up to Easter we are preparing ourselves both to understand the death on the cross and then again the triumphant Resurrection on Sunday morning. We're doing that here by walking with Jesus in the way of his sorrows. We're using the Gospel of Mark and meditating on various passages.

Today we have before us three separate scenes. I don't think there is clearer evidence of the nature of sin than we have in these three scenes, and therefore of our need for the forgiveness that Jesus is working out. The first will be Peter, who will proudly declare that he will never leave Jesus. The third will be Judas' presence on the scene when he gives Jesus that kiss, and in the middle Jesus' profound prayer because he sees how painful it will be for him to drink the cup—the cup of his suffering and our salvation. Stay with me now as we continue to walk the way with Jesus.

Mark 14:26-31

And when they (Jesus and the disciples) had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

. And Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.

"Peter said to him, "Even though they all fall away, I will not. " And Jesus said to Peter; "Truly I say to you, this very night before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times." But Peter said, vehemently, "If I must die with you, I will not deny you!" And they all said the same

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"Hey, look me over, Lord! Check me out! I know I wasn't worth much before—but I've changed, right? I'm your solid citizen now, a solid Christian, loving you, trusting you, forgiving my neighbor as I would be forgiven. Why, I've confessed your name at work, and you know how grim those guys can be. But they know I'm a Christian. They don't curse near me no more. Feel my muscle, Lord! Bigger, right? I'm your man. Hey, I'm your disciple!

(So says the self-satisfied Christian.)

(No one can see in the night, but he's wearing a beatific expression and strutting rather like a rooster. There are eleven others strung out and strolling down the dark road behind him. This one has taken the lead beside a smaller man; whose whole manner is slow and broken by sorrow. The smaller man says—)

"You will all fall away. '

"Whoa! You can't mean that! Not all of us. Not me, I mean, all right" I know folks who could care less about you, right? Skip church, don't pray but when there's trouble, love their cars more than you. They say they're Christian, but when it comes to the crunch, they drop you, Jesus. I pray. I do—daily and long because I love you! I go to church. I serve on seven boards, I tithe, I fast, (though no one knows this but you)—I mean, I really practice my faith. I visit people in the county jail, right? Look, even though everyone else falls away, I won't."

(The small man halts, forcing the strong one to stop and be still. To him sadly, to him particularly, the small man says—)

Truly, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.

"No! No, you don't mean me. Oh, Jesus, how can you doubt me like that? Me, of all people! Me, who loves you the most! Don't I always speak up for you? Okay, okay— what

should I do to prove my love? You tell me! You want me to quit my job? Sell everything? Become a missionary? I mean it! You want me to die for you? I will, Lord, I promise. I will. But I will never, never deny you!"

(The smaller man turns and continues to walk through the night, silently. He does not answer the persistence of the strong disciple. He will let actions speak for themselves.)

Mark 14:32-42

And they went to a place which was called Gethsemane; and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray. " And he took with him Peter and James and John and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even unto death. Remain here and watch. " And going a little farther; he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.

There is a cold light falling from indifferent stars—a light like the finest of snows, pale on the ground, pale on the hair and the shoulders of the sad band of men moving outside the city.

They pause by a grove of black trees. Four men separate themselves and enter the trees.

Listen! One man is groaning. His breath comes in quick pants, compulsively. Listen! Oh, God!" He goes alone now, deeper among the trees—while the other three arrange themselves on the ground, their backs against the tree trunks. These three begin to nod. Soon they sleep.

The woods are pale and silent.

That one man, totally alone, is swaying back and forth as if dizzy, his face in his hands. Suddenly he crumples to the ground. "Abba! Abba!" The sound is strangled in his throat. His fingers dig dirt like the roots of trees. His chin and his beard grind against the earth.

"Abba, Father, I don't want to do this! Please! You can do anything; then take this cup away from me—"

The man's voice is hoarse, a kind of guttural barking. But then he sucks air and howls at the top of his lungs, "Hell is in that cup! Death and damnation are in that cup! My Father, my Father, it will tear me away from you! No! I don't want to do this! No! Sin is in that cup – and if I drink it you won't look at me, you will loathe me. I will hate myself! I don't want to drink it! Abba, Abba, take the cup away from me --."

The man twists his body underneath the trees, then holds himself in a tense, unnatural posture, his face upward, his eyes shut, his breathing sharp through his teeth. He grimaces, as if smiling, and then whispers almost inaudibly, whispers as soft as the leaves: "Nevertheless . . . not what I want . . . what you want . . . do."

When, in the pale starlight, this man returns to the three he left behind, he finds them slumped and snoring. He is alone. Even beside his friends he is completely alone.

And so, he prays a second time as though he had not prayed the first. He prays till the sweat runs down his temples. His voice is a wolf's howl in the woods, "Abba!" – and still his friends are slumbering.

His third prayer is so quiet and so private an anguish that his body does not move. He waits in darkness, in a perfect silence, for an answer.

And when he returns to his friends the final time, waking them with the news of his own betrayal, saying, "Rise, let us be going," – this in that hour, is what the solitary man is doing: he is drinking. He is drinking from the cup.

Mark 14:43-49

And immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I shall kiss is the man; seize him and lead him away under guard." And when he came, he went up to him at once and said, "Master!" And he kissed him.

There comes an orange snake eastward through the night. A snake of fire, a long snake of torches. Perhaps the disciples glance down from the Mount of Olives and see it and do not understand. Jesus understands. It winds the same path they themselves have followed from the city. It winks through the trees in a smooth and silent serpentine approach. It is a fatal snake. It kills by kissing.

The binding strength of that snake is the armed guard of the temple and the police of the Sanhedrin. Behold how the servants of God can bite.

But the head of the snake is one of the twelve, a disciple of Jesus. Behold how an intimate may kiss for other reasons than affection and respect.

Suddenly Judas Iscariot appears beside the group of friends who stand outside the Garden of Gethsemane. Smiling. Judas is smiling. And claiming his accustomed place. And holding his torch aloft to shed light on the faces around him. Peering into those faces. Looking for ... no, not for John, not James; no, not for Andrew or for Peter, though he greets them all with familiar nods. He's looking for ... ah!

The snake coils now into a thick knot of bodies and flame before the disciples. It has scores of eyes all flashing red in the torchlight. Its scales are weapons, swords and clubs adorn its sides. Its silence is tense, a dead menace in close proximity—and it stinks of human sweat.

The disciples swallow, nervous and uncertain.

Jesus gazes and waits.

"Now, the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made." From the beginning its movement was smooth, its manner mild, its promise to elevate whom it would eat. It was a murderer even from the beginning; a liar, the father of lies, and the father, so Jesus once declared, of—

But the serpent strikes! Smiling, Judas says, "Rabbi," and kisses Jesus. A sign of devotion. A sign for the temple guard, that this is the one to seize and lead away. A lie.

In a garden once the Lord God decreed enmity between the serpent and the seed of the woman, enmity to the death. In a garden again that enmity produces this pathetic assault: a kiss that can kill.

But the serpent, that father of lies, is father, too, of what other brood? Why, of a human brood!—of those who know the nature of God and yet reject him! "You," Jesus once said, "you are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires."

"Even so do children, tragically, exchange one Father for another. How long must it be before the second father is exposed as a fraud and a murderer?"

And even so, with the meekest of gestures, has the war for the world been engaged. With a kiss. And the kiss has a tooth. And the snake that struck the Lord has a back of fire and a body of human opinion.

So, we have three pictures of the nature of sin: In Peter, the boldness of those Christians who think that it is the strength of their faith that saves them rather than the Lord in whom their faith is; and Judas, who declares how sin itself perverts the most affectionate of gestures; and Jesus, who really sees how much suffering he's going to go through.

But we cannot end our program there, can we? We know of the consequence of Jesus' going through with it. That marvelous moment when, seeing what horror is yet to come, Jesus says, "Yet, your will, not mine, be done." In that moment we also see the incredible power, the completeness, the everlastingness of Jesus' love. In spite of all of his knowledge and the pain, which is to come, he chooses to accept it for our sakes. For all of our sakes. We who are Peters, who are proud, we will find salvation in Jesus. And even those of us who have been Judas, if we would only turn and repent, we will find salvation in Jesus. The hard word always ends with this blessed declaration. But the story has its completion and its end in a Resurrection that declares forgiveness.

We will walk with Jesus yet next Wednesday and the Wednesdays to come before Easter. But in this moment rejoice. Whatever we see of sinning, however deep our sight has gone, even so high is God's forgiving.

Prayer

O Lord Jesus, first give us the ability genuinely to acknowledge our sin. Only then do we also know our need of you. And having acknowledged our sin, Lord, then give us the sweet ability to focus our attention, our hearts, and our eyes altogether on you, not on ourselves anymore. For in you is our salvation. In you is the forgiveness that lifts us up. In you is the

Resurrection that we can begin even now to live. Glory unto you, Lord Jesus, Glory for your love and for your action, for setting us free. AMEN

And now, as you go on your way through these Wednesdays called Lent, even unto the Resurrection of our Lord, may that Lord go with you. May Jesus go before you to show the way; may he go behind you to encourage you; beside you to befriend you; above you to watch over you; and within you to give you peace!

#347 – Go to Dark Gethsemane