

Entering the Passion of Jesus

“The Garden: Risking Temptation”

[John 18:1-11](#)

As Meredith has just pointed out in her message for the children, everyday, we all face many different kinds of temptations.

There was a little boy who liked to play in the next door neighbor’s yard. His mother told him not to, but he continued to go over there. So, she asked him why he was so disobedient. He replied that Satan tempted him so bad and he did not know what to do. The mother said to him, “Honey, just remember to say this whenever you are tempted, ‘Get behind me, Satan!’” Then, she built a fence around the house.

It worked for a while. Then, one afternoon, the mother saw a hole in the fence and her son playing in the neighbor’s yard again. She summoned him back home and asked him, “Son, didn’t I tell you to say, ‘Get behind me, Satan!’ whenever he tempted you?” The boy replied, “I said it, mom. But, then, Satan went behind me and pushed me through the hole in the fence.”

Today’s scripture reading reveals to us that Jesus was also tempted. After his Passover dinner with his disciples, Jesus took three of them, Peter, James, and John, and went to a place called Gethsemane to pray. Gethsemane is an Aramaic word which means “oil press.” The Gospel of Luke says Jesus went to the Mount of Olives to pray, and the Gospel of John calls the place “a garden.” So, that is why we have the expression, “garden of Gethsemane.”

When we picture an image of a garden, we usually imagine it to be beautiful and peaceful. We think of gardens as a place of rest and contemplation. But, for Jesus, the garden of Gethsemane was completely the opposite. It was a place of darkness and distress — a place of danger where he faced the biggest risk of his life.

Jesus knew what was coming. He knew that one of his own disciples would betray him and have him arrested. He knew how the story would end. But, he also had a choice. Could he have avoided the arrest? Of course! He could have fled and gone into hiding. Or, he could have resisted it. His most trusted disciple, Peter, was armed, so he could have asked him to protect him. Or, he could have asked God to send an army from heaven to destroy his enemies. Actually, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says to those who come to arrest him, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matthew 26:53) So Jesus had a choice. He could either save himself or allow himself to be arrested, face a trial, and be put to death.

Mark records that this was not an easy choice for Jesus to make. Jesus is described as becoming “distressed and agitated,” and he says to the three disciples who accompanied him to the garden, “I am deeply grieved, even to death.” Approaching the final hours of his life, his heart was full of anguish. As Amy-Jill Levine writes in her book, *Entering the Passion of Jesus*, the risk Jesus faced in the garden of Gethsemane was “knowing that he [could] save himself and choosing not to do so” (p. 134).

We remember another time when Jesus faced temptation. It was at the beginning of his ministry. Jesus was famished after fasting for 40 days and nights in the wilderness. Satan came and tempted Jesus to use his spiritual power to meet his own needs and to serve his own benefit. Hear the temptations of Satan: “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread;” “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down [from the temple]; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone;” “All of these [kingdoms of the world and their splendor] I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me” (Matthew 4:3-8).

Back then, Jesus did not seem to struggle much with those temptations. He was able to resist them all rather easily, quoting from scripture to stand strong. But, this time was different. The final temptation was overwhelming to him. The Gospel of Luke records that “his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground” as Jesus prayed to God in his anguish. Three separate times in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus cried out, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.”

Yes, Jesus prayed as he faced this final temptation. He prayed to God that the cup he was about to drink would be taken away from him, even though he already knew the answer would be no. In the garden known as the oil press, as he was squeezed, he poured out his heart to God in prayer. In his hour of need, Jesus followed his tradition — for the Israelites offered prayers to God both in times of happiness and joy and in times of fear and distress. And he made his cry out to God personal — just like the psalms were deeply intimate, personal prayers. Following this long line of his faith tradition, he prayed.

Levine writes in her book,

We need personal prayer – to sustain us, to help us find courage, to lament. Jesus provides the example that in cases of extreme concern, of course, we pray for ourselves. “I don’t want to die” is a very good prayer. Who might pray words like this? Firefighters, police, members of the military, those who work with victims of infectious diseases. Every day they might say, “Let this cup pass away from me. I don’t want to do this, but I know this is my vocation, I know this is what I have to do.” We pray to let the cup pass. We pray, “Let your will be done.” That’s Gethsemane. (p.133)

In this trying time of the Covid-19 pandemic, we pause a moment with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. We feel with him the temptations that arise in challenging circumstances of life. We are tempted to find a scapegoat for our misfortune and misery. We are tempted to deny the current reality of our lives. We are tempted to succumb to fear. We are tempted to trust in our own sense of safety and security. We are tempted to close our eyes to the pain and suffering of the world and focus only on our own needs.

And, in our places of temptation, Jesus comes to us and invites us to pray with him, to pour out our hearts to God with our fears and worries, with our anguish and agony, with our hopes and longings. Our prayers may not change our circumstances. The answers to our prayers may or may not be what we are praying for. I believe miracles happen, but I don't know how to explain them. But, one thing I do know is that our prayers change us; our prayers shape us.

The current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic in our nation, especially in hotspots like New York City is bleak. The work of treating coronavirus patients is extremely exhausting and dangerous. But, in the midst of the crisis, an army of health care workers have responded to New York State governor's call for help at hospitals that have been overwhelmed by the pandemic. So far, at least 85,000 people have volunteered for the states' reserve force of medical workers – a group that includes recent retirees returning to work and health care professionals who can take a break from their regular jobs.

Michael Fazio, whose company has recruited over 250 medical workers for New York hospitals, recently said, "It shocks me more and more the calls I'm getting. West Coast nurses are calling me, wanting to help. They are leaving their families, wanting to help. They don't have the fear of COVID-19. Their driving force is saying: 'I'm coming to help fight this, help New York City.'"

Dr. Gallagher, who came out of his retirement that he took just a few months ago said the danger of contracting the coronavirus himself and spreading it to loved ones left him "terrified;" yet, he decided to volunteer. He said, "If it's needed, then, you've got to play our part. We can't leave people hanging out there."

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, this final week of Lent, we find ourselves in a place of darkness and distress. Like Jesus in Gethsemane, we find ourselves feeling overwhelmed, filled with anguish, deeply grieved. But, it is OK. Just know that you are not alone. Jesus, who has walked this road before, walks

with us now. May we follow in his footsteps and join the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us by pouring ourselves out to God in prayer. May we pour out our hearts to God with our fears and worries, with our anguish and agony, with our hopes and longings. For our personal prayers have the power to change and shape us, allowing us to embrace God's will for our lives. Let us pray.