

24 Hours That Changed the World: Agony is Not Defeat*

Mark 14:32-42

**February 28, 2010
Second Sunday of Lent**

Mark S. Bollwinkel

The Hill of Crosses is a pilgrimage site in northern Lithuania. The exact origins are unknown, but it has been suggested that the first crosses were placed on the hill in honor of the fallen heroes of an 1831 uprising against the Russian Empire. Over the centuries, not only crosses, but giant crucifixes, carvings of Lithuanian patriots, statues of the Virgin Mary and thousands of tiny effigies and rosaries have been brought there by Roman Catholic pilgrims. The number of crosses is unknown, but estimates put it at about 100,000 in 2006. Over the centuries, the place has come to signify the peaceful endurance of Lithuanian Catholicism despite the threats it faced throughout history. The site took on a special significance following World War II, when Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union. Lithuanians used it to demonstrate their allegiance to their original identity, religion and heritage. It was a place of peaceful resistance, although the Soviets worked hard to remove new crosses, and bulldozed the site at least three times. On September 7, 1993, Pope John Paul II visited the Hill of Crosses, declaring it a place for hope, peace, love and sacrifice. (Wikipedia)

In was in the summer of that year that LAUMC's youth choir made their first international tour to Russia and visited the Hill of Crosses themselves; leaving with lifelong impressions and memories. Dirk Damonte left his original Confirmation Cross there. There is a picture of it on the cover of the Starfire CD "There Was a Time."

The name, "Starfire," was coined by Tim Dunkin when he directed the group before Paul Svenson, before us. It was Brian Wren, in 1992, who was very intrigued by the name Starfire, and wrote the lyrics to the song we now sing at the end of every show. He was part of a music workshop that we took part in, and ended up collaborating with us on a show that we put together for Jubilee 92. Brian included the line, "never make suns on the earth," in reference to our mission to bring peace and end the nuclear threat. The rest of the song talks about singing a story of birth, giving warmth with our light in the beautiful night.... (Dirk Damonte)

It is the height of irony that the symbol of a brutal and ancient form of capital punishment....the cross....remains one of the most powerful signs of hope. And it continues to inspire just that and more.

In spite of the centuries of poverty and oppression experienced by the Lithuanian people as an ethnic minority within the Russian Empire; in spite of over seventy years of tyranny under Soviet Communism...a regime that did everything in its power to stamp

out religion...Lithuanian Christians endured through their suffering and kept the faith against all odds.

The cross became for them a symbol of the faith, the hope, and the commitment to peace that will not be defeated even in times of great suffering. They found such courage in the journey of Jesus to his own cross through the Garden of Gethsemane.

Following the Passover Seder, Jesus led his disciples out of the City of Jerusalem down the Kidron Valley to an olive garden. It was approximately 11:00pm Thursday night.

The Kidron Valley was also known as the Valley of Jehoshaphat; tradition had it as the place for God's final judgment at the End of the World (Joel 3:2). On one side of the road one could look up at the Temple and on the other side one would find the tombs of the privileged positioned just right for the resurrection of the dead at the apocalypse.

Only the gospel John calls the Gethsemane a "garden", the writer wanting the reader to remember the first beginning of human history in the Garden of Eden; he will also suggest that Jesus' tomb was in a garden (19:41) and that on Easter morning Mary Magdalene mistook the risen Jesus for a "gardener" (20:15). Like the apostle Paul, the writer of John sees Jesus as the new Adam and the events of his life and death as the new beginning of history itself (I Cor. 15:45, Rom 5:12-f).

The Mount of Olives faced the Temple across the valley, it was the place where King David wept and prayed upon learning of the betrayal of his son Absalom (2 Sam 15:30), it was the place the prophet Zechariah prophesied the coming of the Messiah (Zech 14:4). "Gethsemane" in the original language refers to "an olive oil press", a large contraption used only during the month of olive harvest and laying idle the rest of the year. It was the perfect place to gather in seclusion and we are told a common place for Jesus to pray.

Jesus asks Peter, James and John to be with him as he goes to prayer. Like the other disciples they fall asleep. Sometimes the best thing a friend can do is 'just be there', not to fix things, not to offer advice, just be there. The disciples couldn't even do that. Jesus would have to face the agony of these last hours alone.

We are told that he was deeply agitated and distressed. We are told that he prayed to God, three times asking that "if possible might this cup pass from me..."

Does it seem odd that the Son of God would struggle at such a moment to embrace his destiny?

Jesus knew that Judas would sell him out to his enemies with a kiss. (Mark 14:18)

Jesus knew that Peter would deny even knowing him. (Mark 14:30-31)

Jesus knew that the rest of the disciples would run away and abandon him when he needed them the most. (Mark 14:27)

And Jesus knew that he had to die, in fact he knew it all along. (Mark 8:31-32)

And he knew that Easter was coming, having predicted to his misunderstanding disciples a number of times that Easter was coming. (Mt. 26:31-35, Mk. 14:28, Lk. 27:31-34, John 13:36-38).

Why then was he distraught? Why was Jesus so sad in Gethsemane?

In the book which inspires this series, Pastor Adam Hamilton suggests that Jesus might be wrestling yet again with The Tempter he faced at the beginning of his ministry while fasting in the desert. Three times the devil tempted Jesus with the easy way out to

glory; with magic, wealth and political power (Luke 41-13). Three times Jesus rejected him.

Here in the Gethsemane, three times Jesus asks God for a way out of the agony he must face alone. And three times Jesus entrusts his life, his future into God's hands; "... and yet, God, not my will but yours be done..." There is nothing easy about facing such temptations or finding the courage to say 'no' to them.

Maybe Jesus was sad because he knew what would happen next to his beloved people and the City of Jerusalem itself. When the majority of Hebrews rejected Jesus as Messiah they began to look for a new one. Thirty-six years later they would find one who would lead them into a war of liberation against the Roman occupation. Four years later, by 70 CE, Israel would be destroyed, the Temple and Jerusalem burned to the ground, its people exiled yet again to the four corners of the world. Jesus knew this would happen. (Mt. 24:2, Lk. 19:41-44) He tried to warn them...he tries to warn us...that "to live by the sword you will die by the sword..." (Mt. 26:52)

Maybe Jesus was also sad because he loved life, he loved his friends, and he loved eating and drinking and laughing and blessing children. This was a man who loved the gift of life itself, and now he was called to die...die a brutal, humiliating and suffering death alone and betrayed.

Yes, he knew it would turn out as a blessing for all time...Easter was coming...but at that moment in Gethsemane, the pain of loss and ending was almost too much to bear.

It would be my hunch that just about everyone here this morning has had moments in their own Gethsemane's, facing their own crosses, enduring their own pain and loss alone.

Maybe after hearing Mom and Dad spend a lifetime promising "never to go into a nursing home", the best thing you can do for their health and safety is to take them to one.

Maybe the diagnosis turns out in fact to be cancer, and your best shot at healing is a course of chemo or radiation.

Maybe the marriage that hasn't been working for years has run out of options, in spite of all your efforts to save it, and its time to say 'good-bye'.

There is nothing easy about Gethsemane moments. We can take encouragement and faith that 'Easter is coming' even in the most difficult of circumstance. But if Jesus..."God's word made flesh to dwell among us" (John 1:14)... can know pain and doubt and fear there is no escaping such moments in our own lives. In fact escaping may be no solution at all.

From the beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 till his last day in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. knew that his calling to lead the struggle for racial justice and equality in America put his life in danger. In fact death threats came daily; he and his family survived bombings, ambushes, he was once stabbed by a deranged person and was beaten by the police while being jailed all through the movement.

On April 3rd, 1968 Dr. King would give his last speech. Exhausted from endless meetings, marches and demands he didn't want to speak at the gathering of striking sanitation workers in Memphis that night but was coaxed into doing so by other

movement leaders Rev. Ralph Abernathy, Jessie Jackson and Andrew Young, who were also some of his best friends as well.

The moment was transcendent. He was moved to energy and eloquence he did not know he had. His words were prophetic and full of promise. Meditating on Moses' inability to cross over the river Jordan into the promise land after 40 years of exodus journey with the Hebrew people, King insisted he could see the day when freedom and equality would be a reality for the racial minorities of America:

"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life — longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything; I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." (Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.)

Dr. King was assassinated the next day, shot on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, dead at the age of 39.

"...Not my will, but your will be done...."

Faith in the God of love offers us transcendent courage along with the vocation "to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God". Living such a life can transform us and the world. It can make life worth living. But such promise is never without cost and consequence. Yes, Easter is coming...but the only way to it is Gethsemane and the cross, God's ultimate symbol of the power of love and hope.

To love is to abandon myself to another's well being;
To open my heart, to give myself without repayment,
To feel with another, to renounce control.

To love is to suffer.

So I do not ask that you protect me from suffering,
But protect me from selfishness,
Not that you hold suffering away from me,
But that you hold me through it.
Hold my heart open, willing to suffer, unafraid, for the sake of love.
Amen. (Copyright © Steve Garnaas-Holmes,
unfoldinglight@hotmail.com)

*Based on the book and devotional series of the same title by Rev. Adam Hamilton (Abingdon Press, 2009)