



Week #1
The Garden Revisited (Matthew 26.36-56)

God's story with God's creatures begins in a garden: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (Gen 2.15). The garden was God's ideal environment for humanity, and God walked the garden (Gen 3.8) with God's creatures. Our "Walk with Jesus" series begins in a garden, one where "Jesus often met with his disciples" (Jn 18.2b). What unfolds in this garden mirrors that first garden - unveiling the tragic brokenness of even the most faithful of God's creatures.

Matthew 26.36-46

Jesus accompanies his disciples to a garden located "across the Kidron valley" (Jn 18.1) at the foot of the Mount of Olives (Lk 22.39) - "a place called Gethsemane" (Mt 26.36). Gethsemane means "oil press," which makes sense due to the olive groves that likely covered this region in the time of Jesus. Jesus tells the company of his disciples to "sit" while he withdraws for prayer, which he often did. However, as in the Transfiguration (Mt 17; Mk 9), he calls Peter, James and John ("the two sons of Zebedee") to go with him. The calling out of these three disciples signals a heightened significance of the events Jesus knows will unfold in this place.

Matthew tells us that Jesus began to feel deep sorrow and to be deeply troubled (Mt 26.37). Jesus has already told his disciples that he will be taken away and crucified (Mt 26.2) and he understands better than anybody that this garden is where the story, like that of God's original creatures, will take a tragic turn. These feelings of deep sadness and grief are more complex and layered than what is apparent on the surface of the events that will unfold in the garden. From his own imminent suffering, to the faithlessness of his disciples that they cannot possibly begin to comprehend, to the suffering he knows those who believe will face, to the anguish he anticipates Judas will feel, and so much more - Jesus is deeply troubled as everything that has happened to this point in his life and ministry will come to a head here at Gethsemane. He tells Peter, James and John that the psychological pain he is experiencing is akin to death itself (26.38). In other words, Jesus would rather succumb to the dreadful feelings he experiences than continue to experience them. Anyone who has experienced this depth of personal anguish has an insight into not only Jesus' psyche, but also the gravity of this step on Jesus' journey.

Jesus encourages these three disciples to remain with him, which is something Peter has already pledged that he would do (Mt 26.35), and to remain aware of what is going on around them. Jesus asks them to do far more than simply keep their eyes open. The disciples are not there to protect Jesus, although that is likely what they are thinking. Jesus is not telling them to stand sentinel, but to have a heightened theological awareness around the events he knows will unfold before their eyes.

Jesus then falls prostrate before the Lord not too far away from them and cries out in terrible sorrow to his Father. “If it is possible” (26.39), the Incarnate One pleads, knowing within Himself that all things are possible but at the same time understanding that God does not actualize every possibility. He asks the Father to allow him to “skip over” the even deeper experiences of sorrow and human suffering that will come out of the events within the garden. The word translated “cup” in 26.39 figures in the Psalms as both an image of judgement (Ps 11.6, 75.8) and of rescue (Ps 23.5, 116.13). The overarching affirmation about the cup in the Psalms; however, seems to be that “[t]he Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot” (Ps 16.5). That is, the cup is always received from the Lord as a blessing - whether that “blessing” manifests to us as joy or suffering. Working from this Psalmic expression, Jesus shifts the language of his plea from the basis of “power” (if you can) to “will” (if you will). In this last refrain, Jesus confesses an internal conflict of will between his being the Son and also the Incarnate Lord: “But not as I will, but as you (will)” (36.39). It seems that in his humanity, Jesus wants things to turn out a certain way, but as God he understands that in this case the work God seeks to accomplish must come through intense psychological and physical suffering.

In stark contrast to the faithful devotion to God being played out in the life of Jesus in the garden, just feet away from lay the disciples, asleep (26.40). It turns out they could not join Jesus in being vigilantly aware of what is happening around them in the garden - even for one hour! Because they were not “awake,” they missed everything that was playing out before them as Jesus wrestled in prayer before the Father. They are unaware of the tragic possibility that is about to be realized in the garden. The apostles’ lack of awareness and their inability to actually “remain” with Jesus as they said they would speaks powerfully to discipleship in every era.

Following a standard trope within the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, this cycle repeats itself three times. In each instance, Jesus prays to bypass the cup given to him by God, yet yields to the will of the Father. Meanwhile, in an ironic turn, the inner sanctum among Jesus’ disciples cannot seem to not only be vigilant but to simply keep their eyes open. The repetition of the narrative heightens the tragic irony that comes out of both Eden and Gethsemane. These places designed to nurture faithfulness become known markers in time when humanity rejected its Creator and Lord. At the end of the third cycle, Jesus essentially says, “It is too late!” (Mt 26.46) They could not mirror Jesus’ vigilance for even one hour, and now “the hour” (26.45) has arrived. Their lack of faith serves to foreshadow the scene that will emerge in the Garden in the following section.

Matthew 26.47-56

“While Jesus was speaking” to Peter, James and John about the arrival of the “hour” and their continued failure to be aware of the events unfolding in the Garden, “Judas, one of the Twelve” enters. Matthew introduces Judas’ arrival with the exclamation, “Behold!” For the disciples, his entrance is sudden and shocking. As hearers of Matthew’s gospel, we have already been tipped off that Judas will betray Jesus to the Jewish leaders (Mt 26.14-15), but Peter, James, John, and the other disciples have no idea. One of Jesus’ closest disciples appears in the Garden in much the same manner as the famed serpent in Genesis 3.1. And as the serpent brought chaos to the Garden so Judas is here to do the same.

Judas does not “come to the garden alone.” He leads a “great crowd with swords and clubs from the chief priests and elders of the people” (Mt 26.47). John goes into greater detail, saying that Judas led “a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came with lanterns, torches, and weapons” (Jn 18.3). This is the inverse of the crowds flocking to Jesus for healing or to hear his revolutionary teaching. This is a militia commissioned by the Jewish authorities to take Jesus by force. This violent entry contrasts the peaceful solitude that characterized this Garden for Jesus and his disciples, who apparently frequented this space as a refuge. The serpent has entered the Garden and as in Eden the inverse of God’s intention for God’s Creatures is on display.

What follows is an interesting encounter where the Messiah, the Son of God, is tragically misconstrued as an object of human exchange. Judas has promised to “give over” Jesus to the authorities (Mt 26.48), as if he had the power to actually do such a thing. The weaponized crowd presents a show of force to “take possession” of Jesus (Mt 16.48). Their comprehension of Jesus is that of the anti-Christ. They see Jesus not as Messiah,

but as a human revolutionary who must be taken down by counter-revolutionary force. The “immediate” kiss of Judas (Mt 26.48) is an ironic act as a cultural sign of filial love becomes an inverted sign for the one who is to be captured. If the Garden is supposed to be a place of demonstrated faith and trust in God, at this important turning point in the narrative, Jesus’ disciples demonstrate a severe lack of faith. In Judas’ case, he embodies a complete lack of faith as he becomes the agent for the unfaithful to actively demonstrate their rejection of Jesus. As Adam and Eve are barred from the Garden, the Son of Man is taken from the Garden never to return.

Surprisingly, in this midst of this awful moment of unfaithfulness, Jesus calls Judas “friend” (26.50). This language is used of close friends or in the relationship between student and master. We do not know whether in this moment Judas is showing regret as he begins to realize what he has done or resolve in the confidence that he is doing the right thing. Regardless, Jesus calls him “friend,” and encourages him to “do what you came to do” (Mt 26.50). Prior to this moment, Jesus has been clear with his disciples on several occasions that the Cross is inevitable. We know that the chaos of the Garden leads to the Cross. With these few words, Jesus give Judas a word of consolation that his unfaithful actions that amount to the rejection of Jesus will not have the final word. We do not know how Judas responded to Jesus’ confirming plea because the crowd lays their hands upon Jesus and takes possession of him.

This Edenic insurrection is fulfilled in a sudden, violent response from “one of those with Jesus” (Mt 26.51). Neither Matthew, Mark or Luke identify this disciple, but John identifies him as Simon Peter (Jn 18.10). The disciple pulls his sword and cuts off the ear of the servant of the high priest, who also goes unnamed in the Synoptics, but is named as Malchus in John’s gospel (Jn 18.10). The presence of the high priest’s servant signals to us that the unfaithfulness in the violent seizure of Jesus goes all the way to the primary seat of power in Jerusalem. This mob acts on the authority of the high priest, heightening the social, political and theological conflict at play here in the Garden. In addition, as the crowd arrived with “swords,” one of the disciples, likely Simon who has been associated with the Zealots, also arrived with a sword. His “sudden” (“behold!”) response of violence to violence calls to mind the timeless adage, “the one who lives by the sword will die by the sword” (Mt 26.52). Whether Peter’s intent was to initiate the violent revolution to overtake Jerusalem or simply to free Jesus from the clutches of the mob, his is the final act that seals the unfaithfulness of the entire Garden scene. Everyone stands against Jesus at this point, and Jesus makes this point clear in what follows.

First, Jesus reprimands Peter on the basis of his authority as the Son of God (Mt 26.53). Jesus has the authority as the Son of the Father to command twelve legions of angels. Yet, as the Son he knows and now openly receives the reality that the Cross is the way to walk faithfully. Jesus knows that the same power embodied in the angelic armies is present within the Cross. In fact, the Cross is the ultimate, righteous inversion and restoration of the Garden. The Cross subverts the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary powers that have violently erupted in the battle over who will possess Jesus. Jesus tells Peter that revolutionary violence under the guise of righteousness is as anti-Christ as the mob.

Second, Jesus scorns the mob for their violent incursion into the Garden, which highlights their understanding of him as a “bandit,” “robber,” or “insurrectionist” (Mt 26.55). Matthew tells us he speaks “in that hour,” which could be another way of saying “immediately” or “in the moment.” However, it could also tie in with Jesus’ other uses of the term “hour” to speak to the heightened significance of the events that are playing out in the narrative. If we go with the latter reading, Jesus is pointing out the obvious injustice in his capture. They had ample opportunities in the Temple Courts to arrest Jesus as he sat, ate, healed and taught with his disciples. The way they have come to capture Jesus unjustly, at night, and when he is essentially alone, all point to their unfaithfulness before God - not only in their rejection of Jesus but moreso in the disastrous motives in their actions.

So, Jesus neither praises his disciples nor his captors in the midst of the chaos that was once Gethsemane. Unfaithfulness reigns and yet “this whole thing has come to be so that the writings of the Prophets might be fulfilled” (Mt 26.56). Jesus remains faithful to God and the righteous one as a captive who understands the end of this journey.

Given the events that have unfolded, it should be no surprise that “all the disciples abandoned him and fled” (Mt 26.56). On a surface reading, they run for their lives. If Jesus has been captured by the authorities, his disciples are next. They have seen what happens to people who are considered subversive or revolutionary - those who shake up the established order. They know that Jesus is going to be killed, they just do not know whether it will be by stoning or some other means. And, again, they know that they are next. Theologically speaking, the desertion of the disciples results from the test of their faith in the Garden. If Jesus’ closest disciples could not remain awake to the events that were unfolding, what sort of faith did they have in Jesus as Messiah? And when the events turned toward the direction Jesus told them would come to pass, his disciples countered the narrative through violent resistance. So, they flee in terror, uncertain now how the future will unfold - even though they have been with the One who not only spoke to them of the journey ahead but also demonstrated the very presence and power of God among them.

Summary & Conclusion

The Garden - both Eden and Gethsemane - is a place created for faithful fellowship with God. And yet, serpents infiltrate its serenity and bring about chaos that brings about all manner of unfaithfulness. Walking the way of the Cross is Jesus’ response to chaotic unfaithfulness. As we continue to walk in the way of Jesus in the coming weeks, this cycle will continue. And as it continues, may we see that walking in the way of Jesus continues to be the way to discover righteousness in the midst of chaos.