

“Jesus in the Garden”

Matthew 26:26–46

Courage: To remain faithful, simply to remain, in the face of certain crucifixion

The last three weeks, we’ve heard stories of men and women who were faced with fearful and anxious circumstances. This week, we turn to Jesus who faced the worst of circumstances, leaning into fear with faith.

The hour has come

How shaken the disciples must have been. Their Passover supper together had taken a bad turn. Would one of them truly betray Jesus? Would it be Judas? And now, as Jesus led them to the Mount of Olives, a heavy darkness fell across them all.

After a bit, Jesus turned to look at the stumbling disciples. He warned them that they would all fall away. But Peter looked directly at Jesus and declared that though the rest of the disciples might abandon Jesus, Peter never would. Jesus persisted. Before this very night was out and the rooster welcomed a new morning, Peter would deny that he even knew Jesus – not once, but three times. Peter insisted that he would stay faithful all the way. The others did too. And they continued to make their way through the night.

Jesus led them to a quiet place filled with olive trees. The grove of trees had an olive press and the garden was named for that press – Gethsemane.

As they settled in, Jesus asked his disciples to sit and to wait. He wanted to pray nearby, knowing what lay just ahead. He would have to endure this trial alone, but he needed his friends with him now, so Jesus asked Peter, James, and John to join him. Visibly distressed, troubled down to his soul, Jesus told the trio to keep watch.

When Jesus fell to the ground in prayer, he felt nearly overwhelmed. Please, Lord, let this cup pass. Isn’t there another way? Must I? . . . but . . . may your will be done, Father, not mine. . . .

Then Jesus got up and returned to the three posted on watch. He soon saw that all three were sleeping. Confronting Peter, Jesus warned him that a trial lay ahead. If Peter couldn’t stay awake for an hour, how could he ever hope to keep his promise to stay with Jesus to the end. Your spirit may wish to stay faithful, Jesus said, but your flesh is weak.

Jesus left the three a second time to return to prayer. And again the disciples fell asleep. When Jesus awakened them a second time, none of them could say a thing. They couldn’t even look at Jesus.

And again Jesus went to pray. And again the disciples failed him. Perhaps with a note of exasperation, Jesus told them to get up. It was time. The hour had come. Let’s go, he told them. The betrayer was arriving.

And sure enough, as the disciples stumbled to their feet, they saw Judas walking toward them and a large group of armed men following close behind, the arresting party sent by the chief priests. Truly, the hour had come.

Falling asleep

Could the disciples really be so blind, so weak? In Peter, James, and John, Jesus has with him those who were there from the beginning. How hurt must Jesus have been that they had not remained vigilant, sensing the foreboding of this long night? Peter had been so insistent that even if all the rest fell away, Peter would stay true, faithful, beside Jesus to wherever it was they were headed.

And yet Peter too fell asleep. Three times. In a few hours he would deny knowing Jesus – three times. Of course it hurt Jesus, even though he knew how weak, how human, these men were.



I suppose that in their weakness and frailty, we can find encouragement. Jesus led them, taught them, lived with them, loved them . . . and built his church on them. We don't have to be super-heroes to be God's hands and feet in this world. God often uses us despite ourselves.

R. Kent Hughes makes an interesting point about this. He speaks of Jesus "steeling" the disciples, filling them with resolution and determination. Years later, how often would the disciples look back on their time in Gethsemane and resolve to do better.

We must understand that Jesus invited the inner circle to be with him in Gethsemane not because he needed company, but because they needed to learn (especially with their presumption) the secret of steeling their lives for service. The scandal of their failure that night could not be suppressed and underlines the necessity of what Jesus was teaching for the Church Universal.

Verse 34b shows that when Jesus was overtaken with the horror, he told them, "Stay here and keep watch." He wanted them to observe his battle. Luke tells us that he even stated the reason: "Pray that you will not fall into temptation" (22:40). If they had watched closely and entered into prayer like his, they would have found the steel necessary to make it through what was coming. They did watch for a little while, but then shamefully dozed off despite the mortal, noisy combat and suffering of Christ. Jesus desired so much that they learn from him, that in the midst of his unparalleled agony he returned twice more to look after his three weak followers.

When he first returned, he singled out the most vocal of the three, Peter. "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? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak'" (vv. 37, 38). There was kindness here. Jesus understood human weakness, but they must pray or they would fall. Mark says, "Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him" (vv. 39, 40). Finally we read: "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 betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!'" (vv. 41, 42).

Jesus, who so steeled himself in prayer while asking that the "hour might pass from him," accepted it, saying, "The hour has come," and went out to drink the cup and win the greatest victory ever won. The disciples all failed, and significantly Peter, who fell asleep three times, went on to deny his Lord by that same number—hardly a poetic coincidence! But all was not lost. Their scandal was to become their salvation because in the years to come all came to steel their lives in prayer. Peter and James died martyrs' deaths, and John was a man of steel who endured to the end. The lessons are here if we wish to see them.¹

How can our faith better prepare us to handle life's tough times, whether in our personal lives or on the job? How might we steel ourselves so that our faith endures testing? How might a deeper trust in God breed greater confidence in the future? How do we find the peace that passes all understanding and how can we bring this peace to the times when we need it most? These are the questions we need to bring to Advent this year, for yes, "everything is gonna be all right."

¹ Hughes, R. K. (1989). *Mark: Jesus, servant and savior. Preaching the Word* (168–169). Westchester, IL: Crossway Books.