

# Instead of Me

Message #4 – “Abandoned for Me”  
Matthew 26:30-56

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown  
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<sup>30</sup> When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

<sup>31</sup> Then Jesus said to them, “You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’” <sup>32</sup> But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.” <sup>33</sup> Peter said to him, “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.” <sup>34</sup> Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” <sup>35</sup> Peter said to him, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And so said all the disciples.

<sup>36</sup> Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” <sup>37</sup> He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. <sup>38</sup> Then he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” <sup>39</sup> And going a little farther, he **threw himself on the ground** and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” <sup>40</sup> Then he came to the disciples and **found them sleeping**; and he said to Peter, “So, **could you not stay awake with me one hour?**” <sup>41</sup> Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” <sup>42</sup> Again he went away for the second time and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” <sup>43</sup> Again he came and **found them sleeping**, for their eyes were heavy. <sup>44</sup> So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. <sup>45</sup> Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “**Are you still sleeping** and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. <sup>46</sup> Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

<sup>47</sup> While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. <sup>48</sup> Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him.” <sup>49</sup> At once he came up to Jesus and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” and **kissed him**. <sup>50</sup> Jesus said to him, “Friend, do what you are here to do.” Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. <sup>51</sup> Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. <sup>52</sup> Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. <sup>53</sup> Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? <sup>54</sup> But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?” <sup>55</sup> At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, “Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. <sup>56</sup> But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.” **Then all the disciples deserted him and fled. (Matthew 26:30-56)**

Why is it that when God is birthing something new, a battle takes place in a garden?

In the beginning, we had the Garden of Eden. In today's Bible reading, we hear about the Garden of Gethsemane.

- Both gardens were places of peaceful innocence – at least for a time
- Both involved encounters with evil
- Both involved a struggle between doubt and desire
- Both involved people succumbing to temptation
- Both involved treachery and sabotage

Back in January, we discovered that "Eden" means "pleasure." The Garden of Eden was the place of innocent joy where Adam and Eve were both naked and not ashamed. It was the place where God had fellowship with the people that He created – a fellowship that was "very good." It was the dawn of a new beginning, a new covenant, a new day. As we discovered, everything was perfect . . . until it wasn't.

In Eden, another voice – a voice other than God's – had entered into God's garden and began to tamper with the innocence that was birthed there. It would lead to what would become the single most consequential act in all of human history.

At least, until another act, another choice that was made in another garden—the Garden of Gethsemane.

Gethsemane is an old Aramaic word. (Aramaic was a common dialect of Hebrew.) The name Gethsemane is formed by the combination of two words – **Geth and Shemanim** – which together literally translate as "**oil press.**" The Garden of Gethsemane was an olive grove at the foot of the Mount of Olives just on the East side of the city of Jerusalem across the Kidron Valley. To this day, ancient olive trees – whose roots can be traced through DNA and carbon dating back to the time of Jesus– still produce olives, the oil of which is used to light the lights in several of the churches in that area.

Last week, we looked at what happened during Jesus's Last Supper with His disciples – a re-imagined Passover meal that foreshadowed the betrayal and desertion of those who were closest to Jesus.

Today, we pick where we left off. In **Matthew 26:30**, we read that . . .

*<sup>30</sup> When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*

So, Jesus and the disciples left the Upper Room after the Passover meal and they walked from the Upper City (where we believe the Upper Room was located), left through one of the historic gates of the walled Jerusalem city and walked through the Kidron Valley to the Mount of Olives, ultimately to the Garden of Gethsemane – into a place where there would be a very unique battle. And they marched into that battle singing.

The hymn that they sang was from the second part of what was known as the "Hallel." This part of the Hallel included **Psalms 115-118**, and these Psalms were chanted as part of the closing of many a Passover meal that particular night. Whether or not the Disciples realized it – although I'm sure Jesus did – this hymn had great importance for what was about to happen.

Listen to some of what they sang from Psalm 118:

*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;  
his steadfast love endures forever!*

*<sup>5</sup> Out of my distress I called on the Lord;  
the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place.*

*<sup>6</sup> With the Lord on my side I do not fear.  
What can mortals do to me?*

*<sup>7</sup> The Lord is on my side to help me;  
I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.*

*<sup>13</sup> I was pushed hard, so that I was falling,  
but the Lord helped me.*

*<sup>14</sup> The Lord is my strength and my might;  
he has become my salvation.*

*<sup>17</sup> I shall not die, but I shall live,  
and recount the deeds of the Lord.*

*<sup>18</sup> The Lord has punished me severely,  
but he did not give me over to death.*

*<sup>19</sup> Open to me the gates of righteousness,  
that I may enter through them  
and give thanks to the Lord.*

*<sup>20</sup> This is the gate of the Lord;  
the righteous shall enter through it.*

*<sup>21</sup> I thank you that you have answered me  
and have become my salvation.*

*<sup>22</sup> The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the chief cornerstone.*

*<sup>23</sup> This is the Lord's doing;  
it is marvelous in our eyes.*

*<sup>24</sup> This is the day that the Lord has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

*<sup>28</sup> You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;  
you are my God, I will extol you.*

*<sup>29</sup> O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures forever.*

I imagine them singing while they walked . . . until they found themselves in the Garden of Gethsemane. This particular garden was familiar to them. In **John 18:2** we read -- <sup>2</sup>"Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, **because Jesus often met there with his disciples.**"

So, the Disciples would have been very familiar with the garden, very at-home there. This was a place of respite – probably a stop-over point for them on their many trips to Bethany where Jesus's friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived. It was a place where they probably had camped out, where they had relaxed, where they had special times of teaching from Jesus as well as conversations that were at times confusing to them.

But this night was different. The words from Psalm 118 that they had sung strengthened them. They were words of hope.

Yet upon their arrival in the garden, Jesus had a very specific agenda—He needed to pray. Soon after settling into their special grotto, Jesus pulled His closest inner circle together – Peter, James and John – and they walked a little further into the garden, away from the remaining Disciples. And then, with an intensity that they had not seen in their Master before, Jesus told them: <sup>38</sup> . . . *"I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me."*

Literally in Greek, what Jesus tells them is this: "My soul is sorrowful, so sorrowful I can't even breathe."

The battle was beginning.

In verse 39, we read – <sup>39</sup> *And going a little farther, he **threw himself on the ground** and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want."*

Literally in Greek, it says, **"He fell on his face."** This is the posture of desperate prayer.

Have you ever been there?

Notice that in this very vulnerable moment, Jesus calls God, **"My Father."** It is a moment of deep, sincere anguish... but also deep, sincere trust in the One who has set the course for Jesus fulfilling the divine mission.

*" . . . **if it is possible,**" He says, "let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want."*

To be clear, after telling the Disciples multiple times that He was going to be betrayed, arrested, abused and crucified, and that *this* was the reason that He was sent, was Jesus now asking God to change it all? If that were true, I've got to be honest, I can't say I blame Him. He knew what crucifixion was. He knew what agony lay before Him. He knew that every cell in His body would ache under such torture in the hours that were yet to come. Can we blame Him for wanting God to take that away? He could easily have run off, run to Bethany—to Mary and Martha's house, and then further on where Judas couldn't find Him.

Well, I don't believe that's what Jesus meant by His prayer. To help us understand what this prayer meant, let's look to the apostle Paul in **2 Corinthians 5:21** –

<sup>21</sup> *For our sake **God made him to be sin** who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

I think the "cup" that Jesus wanted to "pass from" Him – the "cup" that caused Him such sorrow and agony in that Garden – was the thought that He would take onto Himself the sin of humanity -- and by doing so, in that moment of becoming sin, He would experience such profound abandonment from God.

This "cup," I believe, referenced the third cup at the Passover meal that they had just shared together – the **Cup of Redemption**—the Cup that Jesus said was His *"blood of the new covenant shed for many for the forgiveness of their sins."* This Cup had a price tag—and it was very costly. The holiness of God, in this moment of Jesus becoming sin, would cause God to "turn His face away" from His beloved Son. In Matthew 27:46, we read what Jesus actually felt

when He was on the Cross in that moment – when He quoted from Psalm 22 – **“My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?”** ... *“why have you abandoned me?”*

It wasn't so much the act of crucifixion that Jesus was grieving. I believe He was anticipating the loss of even a moment of His intimate connection with His Heavenly Father - as He Himself would become the sin that had, since the Garden of Eden, separated humanity from God. He would experience raw, devastating abandonment. He would be totally and unequivocally alone in the sin that had defined humanity since the beginning of time.

And yet, in His prayer He said, *“. . . yet not what I want but what you want.”*

Three times Jesus prayed this prayer. However, when He goes back the second time, notice that His words are slightly different—at least in Matthew's account. In verse 42, we read...  
<sup>42</sup> *Again he went away for the second time and prayed, “My Father, **if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.**”*

***“If this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”***

Even though the kiss of betrayal by Judas, the arrest, the false accusations, the mock trials, the torture, and the crucifixion were all still to come, I believe that here in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Garden of the Oil Press, something very precious was being squeezed out of Jesus.

You see, **in order for oil to be made, olives first must be crushed.**

In fact, in the ancient methods of oil pressing, olives first would be crushed by a heavy stone wheel. That process would turn the olives into a pulp. Then this pulp would be put into large woven bags and then placed under the “gethsemane” – or oil press. The bags were placed on the underside of a wooden beam sitting on top of a pressing board. Large stones were then added to the other side of the wooden beam to weigh down the beam in order to increase the pressure on the olives. Pressure was progressively increased until all of the oil could be syphoned from the olives. And because of the color of the olive's skin, often the oil would have a brownish-red color – making it look almost like blood.<sup>i</sup>

By the time Jesus had finished praying, three things had occurred:

**First, Jesus had completely submitted in obedience** to becoming the One who would *“give His life as a ransom for many,”* as it says in **Mark 10:45**. Or as the apostle Paul would say in **Philippians 2:8** – Jesus *“humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”* The weight of the sin of humanity would be crushing and agonizing. And every ounce of the oil of grace would be syphoned out of Jesus's life.

**Isaiah 53:5** says—*“But he was wounded for our transgressions, **crushed for our iniquities;** upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.”*

**Second, Jesus's decision to go toward the battle lines, as His ancestor King David did when facing Goliath, helped Him engage the unfolding drama of His pending crucifixion and death on the terms of the divine mission.** In other words, Jesus was playing out God's agenda – not Judas's, not the religious leaders', not the Roman guards'.

And third, in that Garden, on His face before His Heavenly Father, **Jesus remembered** that even in the prospects of total abandonment, “God’s steadfast love endures forever” (Psalm 118:29).

There are times when we need to go into the garden alone. The garden is indeed a place where God births new life. But, as we have seen, it is also a place where great battles occur – battles that challenge our sense of who we are, who God is, why we are here, and what we need to do to remain faithful to the One who has called us, the One who died for us. In those moments, we may find ourselves flat on our faces in desperate prayer, only to emerge periodically to discover that even our closest friends are not able to stay awake with us in our season of need.

Yet, in faith, we know that because Jesus did what He did in the Garden of Gethsemane—because He faced into the abandonment that *we* deserved, because He died the death that He died *instead of us*, because He was crushed for *our* sins—because Jesus did all of that, we know that those who put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ will never, ever be abandoned. The apostle Paul knew this truth when he wrote in **2 Corinthians 4:8-10** –

*<sup>8</sup> We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. <sup>10</sup> We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.*

God has been carrying out a plan that would forever change the trajectory of our lives. Why? Because evil – no matter how bad it is – ultimately does not have the power to thwart what God births.

Paul puts it this way in **Romans 8:35-39** –

*<sup>35</sup> “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . <sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

For those of us who are in Christ Jesus, nothing – absolutely nothing – can separate us from God’s love.

Nothing.

Do you believe that?

Let’s pray our prayer together: **Lord, what do you need me to see, what do you need me to hear, what do you need me to know, what do you need me to do? I am your servant in Jesus’s name. Amen.**

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<sup>i</sup> For more information, see, for example, <https://www.biblewalks.com/oilpresses> .