

Riverside United Church
March 16, 2025

Scripture Lesson: Luke 22: 39-46

He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, 'Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.' Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.' [[Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.]] When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, and he said to them, 'Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.'

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

“The Last Hours - #2 The Garden of Anguish”

On Wednesday night, I was at the Community Iftar which is hosted in the season of Ramadan by the Mosque of Mercy and the Assunnah Muslim Association. There were about 200 people there, and one of the speakers was a member of the Ottawa Police Service, speaking on behalf of the Chief, and was also a member of the Muslim community. He spoke about how important it is that human beings live on the moderate path, because the work of the police is dealing with what happens when folks move into the extremes of behaviour. There are a variety of reasons why extreme behaviour is prompted or enacted.

There are also a variety of professionals and communities that respond to the extremes of human behaviour. It can be difficult to comprehend why people act as they do. One of the emotional responses that we have when we see actions on the extremes - when we have to respond to evil - is anguish, that sense of mental or spiritual distress.

There seems to be a lot of anguish in our lives and world these days. There is global anguish over the imbalance of power, over the crisis of climate change, over the migration of people from war torn countries or from places of little hope for survival. As a nation, we are living with an existential anguish over threats from a President who is out of control with his perception of the power that he has. It's difficult when it is the power and principalities that move to the extreme edges of ideology and behaviour. Individually, we live with various sources of anguish as we grieve, as we live with health realities, as we struggle for worth and meaning, as we seek enough

food or adequate housing, as we try not to let fear overwhelm us.

So how do we process the anguish?

Today, we continue our Lenten focus on the last hours of Jesus' life. Often we hear all these scenes of the last hours on Good Friday and it is hard to give attention to all the details, characters and twists in this passion narrative. So, for the season of Lent we are going to spend a bit more time of the different scenes of this intense drama of death and life. So last week we heard the story of the Last Supper and how Judas was at the table of grace even though Jesus knew that he would betray him.

Following that Passover meal, Jesus and the disciples go to the Mount of Olives as a retreat of prayer. It says Jesus has been here before - to the place, maybe not to the emotion and anguish of his soul on this night. Other gospels speak of it as the garden of Gethsemane, but Luke just says the Mount of Olives. These are a powerful few verses of drama and emotion, as Jesus says to his disciples:

'Pray that you may not come into the time of trial. Then he separates a stone's throw from them and we hear him pray: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done."

That sentence warrants a few sermons, or at least a few points in one sermon!

This scene is often referenced when the humanity of Jesus is emphasized. We live with the teachings of the church that speak of the divinity and the humanity of Jesus as if that is two separate parts of his being. Yet, Jesus embodies both humanity and divinity in his teaching and living. There is no switch that he turns to divinity and then to humanity.

In his being these are a challenging last few hours. There would be preachers that would say that he knew the plan and will of God and that all these of events were pre-destined and that from the beginning he would have known how his life would unfold.

Well I am not one of those preachers. I see this drama of his last days and last hours as unfolding in real time because it's a drama of human dynamics of power, of love, of jealousy, of truth. Jesus knew that he was confronting the extreme reaction of the powers and principalities - both political and religious, but his determination was to live true to who he was. He knew that there were a lot of forces and expectations at work and the only thing that he could control was how he responded.

And so I find this scene in the garden powerful because there was this moment when he was overwhelmed, when he was filled with anguish - a moment when he wished he didn't have to be in the situation he was in.

And I think that's a very human experience. It is not the weakness of his humanity shining

through. It's the full range of his humanity being shared. "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me;" In the grammar of the English version, these words end with a semi-colon inviting a pause of breath, a pause of thought. But I wonder how long that pause was in the garden of anguish. How long was Jesus lamenting? How long was Jesus' longing for a different way for this to unfold?

How often in our gardens of anguish do we lament what is happening? How long to hold the breath of despair, of fear, of discouragement, of pain?

So how long do you think it took for Jesus say, "yet, not my will but yours be done."? I imagine it was longer than the pause implied with a semi-colon of grammar.

So how do we understand God's will being done in this story? Some of the traditional understandings of this passion narrative of Jesus are quite certain about the answer to that question. The death of Jesus is promoted as the sacrifice willed by God so that the sins of humanity can be forgiven. And if that understanding gives meaning and purpose to your faith and life that's important. Yet, I imagine that I am not the only one who has questions about that theological interpretation.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in their book, The Last Week, offer these words commenting on that sentence: "It is important to add that this does not mean that Jesus' death was the will of God. It's never God's will that the righteous suffer. It's not God's will that Jesus died, any more than it was the will of God that any of the martyrs before and after Jesus were killed. ... The prayer reflects not a fatalistic resignation to the will of God, but a trusting in God in the midst of the most dire of circumstances." (p.123)

The will of God is not violence, the will of God is not murder. The will and way of God is that the disguises of evil are pierced with a commitment to truth, to justice, to compassion, to love. Jesus was committed to that path, to that way and in the midst of his circumstances where evil was present, he regained the courage in the garden of anguish to remain true to who he was and to the vision of life and love that was part of his Holy DNA.

There are times when we live in the garden of anguish. There are times when the voice of God is silent, when the presence of God feels distant. There are times when various disguises of evil affect our lives and we are overwhelmed with anguish, despair, fear, doubt.

And we are invited to have the resources to help us through those times and experiences.

As I think back to the comments of the police officer at the community Iftar, what the resources that keep us on the moderate path of balance and perspective? The detours to the extremes are too common - psychologically, sociologically, emotionally, spiritually.

Jesus faced the anguish with prayer, as was his custom. In prayer, the focus is not on ourselves,

but on reflecting and meditating on that which is beyond us and known deep within us. In worship, we learn the stories, the verses, the practices that enable us to know a way to reflect, to keep perspective, to be inspired, to find our place in a story larger than ourselves.

Our society has become quite suspicious and hostile to religious practice - and there are some good reasons for that - but our society is also craving a spiritual health that offers balance and perspective. It is hard to nurture the reflection and discernment of truth in a world where focus and priorities change every moment or two. We need a longer spiritual attention span.

Another insight from this story is that Jesus was a stone's throw away from his friends, from community. In this case, the community was more confused and bewildered and tired and living in anguish than Jesus was. But, they were there trying their best to walk with him.

And when we find ourselves in the garden of anguish, when we cry out, "O God why are you silent ...", it's helpful to have some trusted friends, some companions in community to walk with us. The job of the companions, the job of the community is not to fix, but to befriend with wisdom and love.

Jesus offered the prayer to his disciples, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial", but he probably knew that they would. Maybe not to the same consequences that he was about to live through, or to die through - but hoping that if they did that they would have the courage, the wisdom, the trust to find their way.

And that hope extends to each of us when we find ourselves in the garden of anguish. May we trust that we will have the wisdom, the courage, the companions to find our way - especially when that anguish is longer than a semi-colon suggests. Amen.