

Entering the Passion of Jesus – Chapter 6 Gethsemane: Risking Temptation

The Gospels again present us with variations on a theme. The name *Gethsemane* appears only in Matthew and Mark. Luke sets the scene on the Mount of Olives while John places it in a garden across the Kidron valley. When we put these descriptions together we arrive at “the garden of Gethsemane.”

In the synoptic Gospels Jesus suffers in these moments before his arrest and prays earnestly that “this cup” would pass from him.” In John’s Gospel, Jesus is not in agony, he is in control. There is no prayer for the cup to pass, for throughout the Gospel Jesus has been anticipating being “lifted up.” “The Gospels give us a choice, which is a blessing. We can choose which depiction speaks most fully our hearts: the man of sorrows or the triumphant conqueror. Different people will necessarily have different perceptions of Jesus, and of God.”

The Risks

“Gethsemane is the biggest risk of all. Jesus is about to be arrested. Could he have stopped the arrest? Of course. Could he have run away? Of course. His disciples are armed, so he could have asked them to do something.” The risk is the knowledge that he can save himself and choosing not to do so.

There is also divine risk, Jesus will suffer, and God will suffer as well. “The darkening clouds at the cross are divine pathos. The rending of the Temple veil represents not some form of new access to God, since God is everywhere and everyone always has access. Rather it represents God’s mourning, for in Judaism, the sign of mourning is to tear one’s garment.”

The disciples risk as well. Jesus asks them to stay awake while he prays. “And they can’t. They fail, and yet somehow they are redeemed.” What do we do when we fail our family, friends, neighbors, and God. Anytime we are in relationship, we are always risking something.

Nonviolence

According to both Mark and Matthew, when Jesus is arrested one of those near to him drew a sword and cut off the ear of the high priests slave. Matthew says that Jesus commands that the sword be sheathed, saying those who take the sword will perish by the sword. Luke adds that Jesus healed the slave and said “No more of this!” In John, we read that Peter is the one who used the sword and Jesus orders him to return his sword and stop the attack.

“All of these incidents speak to matters of self-preservation. When do we fight back and when do we engage in nonviolent resistance? When, if ever, do we allow others to engage in violence on our behalf? Jesus warning that those who take the sword will perish by the sword is not, according to Levine, a prohibition against all use of the sword. “The point is not that one should never take up the sword, but it is a warning about the danger of violent attack.” In this situation, Jesus “does not want the disciples fighting for him, and he does not want others to be injured. He knows what he must do, and he will do so without violence.”

The Naked Young Man

“The naked young man, who flees not only from Gethsemane in Mark 14:52 but also disappears in all the other Gospels, which do not mention him, remains a major topic of discussion in biblical studies.” Some suggest this is Mark himself. Other ideas include an anticipation of the “young man” in the Mark who is dressed in a white robe and greets the woman at the empty tomb (Mark 16:5), a disciple of Jesus who was preparing for baptism, James the brother of Jesus, another disciple, or Lazarus. The list is endless.

“Or perhaps he is Mark’s reader—fearful, naked, risking arrest himself, about to face the death of Jesus, and unable to do anything about it. He remains a mystery, and into his mystery we move, step by step, to the cross. We too are vulnerable and fearful, we too have deserted, we too have failed to stop what cannot be stopped. Before we can be built up, Lent will strip us down, and in that rawness, that openness, we can begin to heal. Before we get to the resurrection, there will be suffering, and crucifixion, and death.”