

“Broken Sanctuary”

The meal is done. The Passover, Jesus’ last Passover, has been observed. The memory of God’s exodus deliverance has been revived and celebrated. The traditional Passover foods have been heartily consumed with all the relish and nostalgia of an American family sitting down to Thanksgiving turkey, stuffing and pumpkin pie. The wine has been finished and now the little group, Jesus and the Eleven who are left, heads off, no doubt at a slow and easy pace, to the usual nighttime spot.

It is a friendly and familiar place, this Mount of Olives. This special garden spot was very likely a place designed specifically as a quiet diversion and escape—perhaps the garden of a wealthy friend or supporter of Jesus who was happy to share his little paradise with the remarkable rabbi. So, the Garden of Gethsemane was a private Garden of Eden for Jesus and the Eleven. Exciting and often tumultuous days in and around Jerusalem followed by a calm and healing night in Gethsemane has been the routine for many days already.

The place is comfortable, safe and secure—a sanctuary. It’s dark—pitch-black dark, but the place is familiar and earthy smells of dirt and foliage are soothing. All of this combined with the supper’s wine in their bellies and on their brains, the disciples are ready to yield to all of nature’s forces and collapse in secure and tranquil sleep.

But not Jesus; unlike His disciples, Jesus knows the situation. He knows that this complacent and comfortable band of men is about to be thrown into chaos and confusion. He knows that this quiet sanctuary is about to be violated and desecrated by hatred, terror and evil. Like Eden before it, Gethsemane is about to be broken. Jesus knows that even now soldiers are collecting their gear, religious and political leaders are finalizing their plans, and one of his own, one of the Twelve, is waiting there with them, shifting, fidgeting in the shadows, watching for the signal to go, ready to do what only he can do.

Judas is ready to lead those soldiers and officials along familiar paths—the paths he learned by following Jesus—out of the city, out to Gethsemane, to do the deed. He is waiting to identify the Teacher from Galilee, to turn over Jesus, to betray his Lord. Jesus knows all of this. The quiet sanctuary, the holy place of Gethsemane, is about to be broken by Judas.

But, Jesus knows more. He knows a reality far more terrible and far more terrifying than the treachery of Judas. Jesus knows the real horror that is about to begin. The time has come for him to finish the mission. It is time for him to shoulder the sin of the world and pay the price. It is time for him to endure the righteous wrath of a Holy God directed against all that is violent and terrible and evil. It is time for Jesus to go through Hell. Gethsemane's sanctuary is about to be invaded, not only by Judas but by all the sins of all people of all time.

It is because he knows all of this that Jesus has come to Gethsemane — not to relax, not to unwind, certainly not to sleep, but to pray and wrestle and brace Himself for what is about to unfold. So, he warns his disciples and then he withdraws to be alone with his Father...to be alone with his agony. Knowing all that he knows, Jesus' warning is appropriate and even kind. The disciples need to watch out, not to get caught off-guard by all that will soon occur. But the warning is futile. *“Fall into temptation? What temptation? That can't possibly happen here.”*

Indeed the disciples cannot fall into temptation—they have already fallen asleep! Small wonder, then, that when the crisis breaks and when the oppression of evil actually descends, the disciples have all the fortitude and resilience of linguini. They collapse, utterly. They fall into temptation most miserably, and we are not the least bit surprised. How could they not crumble into despair and failure? What hope, what strength, what resources do they have? Jesus has withdrawn from them. He's left them on their own. When evil suddenly descends on their sanctuary, they are undone. They fall apart. They fail.

The disciples had their Gethsemane, their sanctuary, a quiet, sacred space

where they felt safe. You've got your sanctuaries, spaces where you feel protected and safe, places where you can relax and be comfortable and secure in familiar surroundings. Maybe it's an actual garden or park, or a room in your home, or maybe it's in your car. But it's more likely that the sacred and safe places in your life, those places where you can count on being safe and secure, are sanctuaries that are not bound by physical space.

You have those places in your life that are precious to you because they give you security. They provide you with shelter and protection from life's trouble and pain ... until sin finds its way in; until evil crashes in without invitation, until Satan dares to vandalize even the holiest and most treasured places in your life. When that happens, your home—not just the building but the relationships, the history, the hope that is your family—is inflicted with the sin of rebellion.

The happiness drains away, the peace is gone and the sanctuary of home is reduced to a war zone, a continual battle of wills, a continual struggle against Satan's temptations: a child's will at odds with a parent's direction, a parent's indifference that devastates a child's self-concept, a child's contempt and disrespect— all of these can shatter the sanctuary.

Or, you may be enduring the pain of a marriage that is no longer a place of solace, hope, and security, but instead an arena of competition and stratagem, an empty façade of loneliness and apathy, a lifeless contract that has been drained of all passion and feeling. Or, perhaps you still endure the dull ache of a marriage torn apart by death itself.

Maybe for you, the sanctuary that has been ruined by the cruel intrusion of sin has been your relationship with God himself. Your walk with God has been polluted by sins of pride and self-righteousness. Maybe the problem is that your relationship with God has become shallow, predictable, and well...empty. The vibrant wonder and joy you once experienced with God now seem like distant memories.

It seems like anymore you just go through the motions. God's not there

like he used to be. Indeed perhaps that is the real problem after all: God is just not present. He has withdrawn. Your sanctuary has been evacuated. Jesus is nowhere to be found. He's over there somewhere, a stone's throw away, and you're left alone, abandoned because Jesus has gone off to be by himself.

He does that sometimes, doesn't he? It doesn't make much sense. Truthfully, it's not something we're even comfortable talking or thinking about. We'd prefer to act like it was otherwise. But, there are times when Jesus withdraws. You call, but hear no answer. You look for his presence, but see only empty darkness. You pray for his guidance and protection, but see no sign of divine activity. It happens more often that you want to admit.

It happens—but it should not drive you to doubt or despair. While we may not like it or talk about it, our brothers and sisters in the faith have experienced the same sort of absence of God for millennia and admitted it. It was a recurrent complaint (or was it a prayer?) of David: ***“How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?”*** Where are you, God? Why don't you do something? Don't you care?

It really doesn't make much difference that he's told you ahead of time that it is going to happen. It doesn't matter much that you've been cautioned not to let the darkness, silence, and loneliness overwhelm you and lead you into temptation. It is pointless that you've been warned not to fall into sin. When Jesus withdraws, it's impossible to stand. When Jesus is gone, you cannot buck up and tough it out.

Like the disciples, you can only disintegrate into helpless, hopeless insignificance. Then the greatest sin of all comes and seeks to crush you with its force. You are tempted by the sin of despair, tempted to give it all up, tempted even to give up on God. This is what happens when Jesus withdraws—and he intends it.

It is not out of vindictiveness or indifference that he withdraws and leaves your sanctuary empty and broken. It is out of love. It is only when you

have realized your inability, only when you have failed in your own effort, only when you have forsaken all possibilities of finding your own way, only when you have given up every sanctuary but him, it is only then that you can be saved. And so, Jesus withdraws and you fall.

And, then he comes. He comes, and you discover that you had it all wrong! He hadn't withdrawn because he didn't care. He didn't pull away because he was unfeeling and cruel. He didn't remain silent because he was powerless to do anything else. He went away, off by himself, because it was the only way to make everything right. He withdrew that infinite stone's throw away, not only to bring humility and repentance but to fight your fight and to battle your demons. He forged alone into the darkness to endure all the terror, all the horror of your sin and failure and shame. He cut himself off so that he could be cut off, even from his Father. He went away by himself to be shredded and shattered by all that is foul and evil. He forged ahead without you; to go to hell for you. He withdrew from you to save you.

That's what the disciples slowly, stupidly, would come to realize on Easter evening. Out of the blue, no, out of the black, Jesus would come to them. On Thursday, he withdrew from them; on Sunday he came for them. Then, they knew: their failure, their defeat, their hopeless despair was not the last word. It did not end with Jesus walking away. He came back. He came for them. He came that Sunday evening not with a fresh warning for them to watch themselves lest they fall. He did not come with a pep talk meant to inspire them to try again. He did not come with a list of rules or suggestions that would lead them to do better the next time. He did not come to deliver a shot of holy power to help spur them on.

No, he came into their broken sanctuary and he gave grace. He forgave. He restored. He made everything new again. He made everything right again. This coming was not a once-for-all event. Jesus kept on coming for his disciples. In the upper room just one week later, on the shores of Galilee, on the mountaintop before his ascension, he came again and

again and again with peace and with grace.

He comes yet again, this day, for you. He comes to you in your broken sanctuary not with a rousing speech designed to fire you up and restore your self-esteem. He comes not with words of insight meant to change your outlook and give you a new, positive, perspective on life. He comes not with a set of principles or procedures that you are to practice on your way to the good life. He comes not with a sharp rebuke and a stern warning that you be more careful.

No, he comes to you with his grace. He comes to you with his forgiveness. He comes to you with his restoration. He comes to you not in an idea, not in a conviction or intuition, not in a feeling, not in some mystical-spiritual way. He does not come roaring in as the grand marshal of a parade or riding on a gallant warhorse.

He comes once again to you in a small piece of matza and in a little sip of common wine—ordinary, cheap, insignificant. Yet, because he comes as promised, that small piece of bread is the most precious and holy thing that you will ever hold in your hand. That half-swallow of inexpensive wine is the richest and most potent drink you will ever taste. In that bread, in that wine, Jesus comes.

Just as he promised, just as he came to the disciples, he comes to you. He comes right into your guts, right into your very being. He comes and he gives you all of his gifts: forgiveness, peace, comfort and the promise of full restoration on the Last Day when he completes every plan and every purpose and fully restores the harmony, beauty and perfection of every garden sanctuary. In bread and wine, he comes to you.

That's what this day, Maundy Thursday, is all about. It's all about the sanctuary. When your sanctuary has been broken and shattered—violated by the filth of sin and evil, when you have nowhere safe to go, when all that you hold precious and sacred has become uncertain and painful, then you come here. You come here to the place where the bread and the wine, where the body and the blood of Christ are waiting for you.

You come here, because Jesus comes to you here. Again and again and again and again, he comes. He's promised it. Nothing can negate or overcome his promise. Your sanctuary is where he is, and Jesus is here ... for you.

Amen.