



The Way of the Cross

Good Friday, 2023



01: Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane



"Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.'" | Matthew 26:36

All is quiet in this garden at the foot of the Mount of Olives outside Jerusalem tonight. The full moon casts an eerie shadow through a tree that foreshadows another tree in the not too distant future. While Jesus prays his disciples sleep. "Keep watch and pray;" Jesus tells them. "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." Are you sleeping through the times when you need to be watching and praying?

Go to dark Gethsemane, all who feel the tempter's pow'r. Your Redeemer's conflict see; watch with him one bitter hour. Turn not from his griefs away; learn from Jesus Christ to pray. (ELW #347)

02: Jesus is betrayed by Judas and arrested



"While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: 'The one I kiss is the man; arrest him.' Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, 'Greetings, Rabbi!' and kissed him." | Matthew 26:47

The silence of the moonlit garden is shattered with the sound of a crowd carrying swords and clubs. They are going to arrest Jesus, the one whom Judas will ironically identify with a kiss. The shadows cannot conceal their deadly intentions. Can you find your face in the crowd behind Jesus?

Ah, holy Jesus, how hast thou offended, that we to judge thee; have in hate pretended? By foes derided, by thine own rejected. O most afflicted. (ELW #349)

03: Jesus is condemned by the Sanhedrin



"The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death." | Matthew 26:59

At whom are they looking? These men are the Jewish high court called the Sanhedrin and they need false evidence to convict this Jesus who has just been arrested. This council of 70 gathered in a hastily arranged meeting at the home of Caiaphas; the high priest. To put Jesus to death, these religious men only need to prove him to be a false prophet. When they question you, what will you say? Is he a prophet? A king? A Messiah? What charge could you make? What evidence would you present?

We come with self-inflicted pains of broken trust and chosen wrong, half-free, half-bound by inner chains. By social forces swept along by pow'rs and systems close confined, yet seeking hope for humankind. (ELW #358)

04: Jesus is denied by Peter



"Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. 'You also were with Jesus of Galilee,' she said. But he denied it before them all. 'I don't know what you're talking about,' he said." | Matthew 26:69

In the ever-increasing darkness of this night, you would think it would be easy to hide in the shadows and not be recognized. But no! Three times Peter is called out as a Jesus follower and three times he disowns the One who said, "Before the rooster crows you will deny me three times." This is what it looks like to hide your face in shame. The night air is filled with "bitter weeping" as the rooster crows its mocking voice. So, what do you say? Would you deny knowing him?

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee? Alas, my treason, Jesus hath undone thee. 'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee; I crucified thee. (ELW #349)

05: Jesus is judged by Pilate



“What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” Pilate asked. They all answered, ‘Crucify him.’ ‘Why? What crime has he committed?’ asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, ‘Crucify him!’ When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood,’ he said; ‘It is your responsibility.’” | Matthew 27:22

As the night of darkness progresses, only the Roman governor held the right to capital punishment. Anyone making Messianic claims was a threat to the Roman government and deserving of crucifixion. According to custom, Pilate could release any prisoner chosen by the crowd and they choose Barabbas, sealing Jesus’ fate. In a symbolic act of hand washing, Pilate is declaring that he is not responsible for what happens to Jesus. He’s done with him! But blood does not wash away so easily. Everyone in this scene has blood on their hands and in their hearts. If you had been Pilate, how would you have handled this situation? What will you do with Jesus?

Follow to the judgment hall, view the Lord of life arraigned. Oh, the wormwood and the gall! Oh, the pangs his soul sustained. Shun not suffering, shame, or loss; learn from him to bear the cross. (ELW #347)

06: Jesus is scourged and crowned with thorns



“Then (the governor’s soldiers) stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head... they spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.” | Matthew 27:27

More than a painful beating, this is humiliation. The purple robe mocks his claim of royalty. Instead of a king’s staff, this stick is used to strike his head again and again. Instead of worship and adulation, this king is spit upon. This king is crowned with a ring of thorns piercing the skin of his head. And ultimately, this king will be enthroned on a cross. As the darkness deepens, Jesus experiences betrayal, condemnation, denial, judgment, and now humiliation. What kind of a king are you hoping for?

O sacred head, now wounded with grief and shame weighed down. Now scornfully surrounded with thorns thine only crown. O sacred head what glory; what bliss till now was thine! Yet, though despised and gory, I joy to call thee mine. (ELW #352)

07: Jesus takes up his cross



“Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha).” | John 19:16

The Roman soldiers had become an efficient killing machine. Convicted criminals bore the additional burden and humiliation of carrying their own cross through the streets to the place of crucifixion. What purpose does this serve? Crucifixion is a stark reminder to the local population of what happens when you defy Rome. One cannot conceive the pain and exhaustion of carrying this weight after the torture of beatings, scourging and the blood loss that would result. This ordeal is too much for any human being to bear. Are there times when you feel “weak and heavy-laden”? Are there days when you are “cumbered with a load of care”? In those times remember this image.

How pale thou art with anguish, with sore abuse and scorn. How does thy face now languish, which once was bright as morn! Thy grief and bitter passion we all for sinners' gain; mine, mine was the transgression, but thine the deadly

pain. (ELW #352)

08: Jesus is helped by Simon to carry his cross



“A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.” | Mark 15:21

Jesus is bloodied and beaten, carrying his own cross to his death and the soldiers force Simon to take the cross and carry it for Jesus. One can only imagine that the soldiers wanted to finish this job and Jesus, beaten to near death, was not able to lift this weight. So Simon makes his brief appearance and does what is necessary. This image embodies Jesus earlier words to “take up your cross and follow me.” Perhaps Simon is like all of us who set aside our selfish agendas and “take up the cross.” There is another hand in the image and this is the hand of Christ, lending all that he can give to Simon. What do you need to set aside in order to follow Christ?

Love serves and willing stoops to serve; what Christ in love so true has freely done for one and all, let us now gladly do. (ELW #360)

09: Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem



"A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned and said to them, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children.'" | Luke 23:27

These women know Jesus and they weep specifically for Jesus. These are not the Galilean women we've come to know in the course of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. These are the "daughters of Jerusalem," and in their distress they wail and cry and beat themselves in deep sorrow. They heard Jesus teach in the temple. They witnessed his healings and miracles. They heard the false claims that bring him to this death walk. He has done nothing to deserve this and they weep in deep sympathy. We, like the women of Jerusalem, are witnesses to this tragedy as well. Can you feel their deep sorrow? Are you angered by this injustice?

What language shall I borrow to thank thee, dearest friend, for this thy dying sorrow, thy pity without end? Oh, make me thine forever, and should I fainting be. Lord, let me never, never outlive my love to thee. (ELW #352)

10: Jesus is crucified

"Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals - one on his right, the other on his left." | Luke 23:32



Jesus is dying, crucified just outside one of the city gates of Jerusalem at this place called the Skull. How convenient, to execute your criminals in a graveyard? He will eventually die as a result of blood loss, dehydration, and asphyxiation. Above his head is a "titulus," a board detailing his crime, carried before the condemned and then hung above the victim. "King of the Jews" it says. Can this be his crime? Is this just cruel mockery or the harsh penalty for defying Rome?

Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they nailed him to the tree? Sometimes it causes me to tremble. Were you there when they crucified my Lord? (ELW #353)

11: Jesus promises his kingdom to repentant thief



“One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: ‘Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ But the other criminal rebuked him. ‘Don’t you fear God,’ he said, ‘since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.’” | Luke 23:39

For the Roman death squad it was highly efficient to execute criminals together. These unnamed thieves portray dramatically different attitudes regarding their impending doom. One hurls insults at Jesus, as the other recognizes Jesus’ innocence and asks for his mercy. One tries to bait Jesus into using his Messianic powers to save them all, while the other sees they are getting what they deserve. Some scholars believe this scene depicts the kind of transition that’s necessary for any follower of Jesus; to turn away from defensiveness and selfishness and embrace this new kingdom of love and peace that Jesus promises to bring.

Jesus, keep me near the cross, there’s a precious fountain free to all, a healing stream flows from Calvary’s mountain. In the cross, be my glory ever; till my ransomed soul shall find rest beyond the river. (ELW #335)

12: Jesus entrusts Mary and John to each other



“Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, ‘Woman, here is your son,’ and to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.” | John 19:25

The long night of darkness is almost over and in this scene, Jesus entrusts his mother into the home and care of John, described as the “disciple Jesus loved.” The well being of Mary seems to weigh on Jesus’ heart and this new arrangement assures that Mary will have the support she needs for the future. Do you notice who is absent from this scene? Where are the other disciples? It is clear that Jesus’ closest followers abandoned him in his final moments. Only John remains, the same person who will write this gospel account that we read today. The women who remain at the cross on this dark night will also be the first to witness his resurrection. Can you place yourself at the foot of this cross? What are you feeling?

Near the cross I’ll watch and wait, hoping, trusting ever, till I reach the golden strand just beyond the river. In the cross, in the cross, be my glory ever; till my ransomed soul shall find rest beyond the river. (ELW #335)

13: Jesus dies on the cross



"From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land... and when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life." | Matthew 27:45

The eclipse of death is complete. "It is finished." Throughout history a celestial eclipse is a sign from the gods that this emperor or ruler is, indeed, divine. There is no mistaking this darkness of three hours in the middle of the day as announcing the death of the "king of kings." The whole earth shakes in agony as rocks split and tombs break open. The scriptures tell us that many "holy people" who had died experienced resurrection in that moment. Even the death of Jesus Christ cannot hold back the powers of Easter resurrection. Can you feel hopeful at the very moment that Christ dies?

Upon the cross of Jesus, my eye at times can see the very dying form of one who suffered there for me. And from my contrite heart, with tears, two wonders I confess; the wonder of his glorious love and my unworthiness. (ELW #338)

14: Jesus is laid in the tomb



"Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea, and he himself was waiting for the kingdom of God. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid." | Luke 23:50

The darkness of death covers the earth. In the shadow of the cross, at some distance, stand those who knew him and the women who followed him from Galilee. Joseph and his friends had been entrusted with the body of Jesus and the followers of Jesus watched them take Jesus from the cross and carry him to a newly hewn tomb. There, the body of Jesus is wrapped in burial cloths and laid to rest. A large stone was rolled across the entrance to the burial chamber. And so it ends. Or does it? Is something in "the air"? Can you glimpse a hint of resurrection light coming from the tomb?

Were you there when they laid him in the tomb? Were you there when they laid him in the tomb? Sometimes it causes me to tremble. Were you there when they laid him in the tomb? (ELW #353)

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