

**“FLASHBACKS – AN INTRODUCTION TO MEDITATIONS FROM THE GARDEN,” delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, Maundy Thursday, April 14, 2022**

Tonight we gather as Jesus did with his apostles. For Jesus it was a truly fateful night. Although in his humanity Jesus was not omniscient or all-knowing, he was keenly perceptive and could foresee what was likely to unfold as he brought his ministry of proclamation and witness to Jerusalem during its Passover festival. His ministry had long since caught the attention of authorities—Roman and Jewish. His vision of a new heaven and new earth as God’s reign of righteousness and love dawned rattled them all—indeed, frightened and threatened them. They rightly believed their own power was at stake. For his own part, Jesus knew his own life was on the line.

Everything that Jesus did this night that we observe was shaped by his conviction that his earthly ministry among us was culminating and nearing its end. With this reality in heart and mind, Jesus sought to prepare and equip his apostles for life ahead without his physical presence. He washed the feet of his apostles to provide an example of servant leadership, guided by humility, rather than any quest for glory. Jesus also made a point of holding up both bread and a cup of wine in the presence of his apostles as symbols of his own body and blood which were to be broken and shed for the salvation of humankind. Although they could not comprehend all that Jesus was saying to them in the moment, he was encouraging the apostles to use such a meal in days future as a remembrance of him and his commandments and promises. In his deep and abiding wisdom Jesus knew that what we now practice as a communion sacrament could and would serve as a powerful source of spiritual comfort and strength, fortifying all of his followers for the many moral challenges ahead. As one more source of comfort, Jesus also had his apostles sing. Yes. Scripture informs us that they sang hymns as their meal finished and their shared final moments in the upper room.

However, there was still one more spiritually fortifying act that Jesus undertook as an example for his apostles and us all. He prayed—and fervently so. For that purpose Jesus led his apostles to a garden he cherished in a hollow or valley that lay between Jerusalem’s walls a half mile away and the Mount of Olives which was actually an orchard of gnarled olive trees. The garden, known as Gethsemane, which is a Greek word for “olive press,” was a very quiet place at night, far from any noisy din.

Unfortunately, while Jesus prayed on his knees, his apostles fell asleep. Was it a case of too much rich food in the Upper Room? Or did a sleep reflex kick in for them because they sensed, as Jesus knew, that something ominous was about to befall them all? Whatever the case, we hear Jesus pleading: “Will no one stay awake with me awhile?”

Hands clasped in prayer, Jesus was truly alone with God, conscious that his own death was drawing nigh and that would be much passion and suffering ahead before any victory through God's grace.

It is said that in our dying moments or when the threat of death is palpable our whole life often passes before our eyes. Did Jesus' whole life from birth in Bethlehem to his recent ride into Jerusalem flash before his very eyes in those moments of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane? I don't know. Nevertheless, those earlier scenes of Jesus' life certainly flash before my eyes as we gather tonight in witness to his faithfulness and sacrifice for us all. All that happened before set the course for his faithfulness to God and steadfast courage in his moments of greatest trial when he literally sweat blood in the Garden of Gethsemane and then shed his life blood on a horrible cross at Calvary so that we might gain eternal life.

I am so grateful for Jesus' whole life among us, even as I humbled by his sacrifice and death for us. All of Jesus' life from beginning to end is inspiring, encouraging, and empowering. Let us both recall and celebrate everything that prepared him and prepares us for these last days of what we call Holy Week, which finishes not in his humiliation and degradation at the hand of evil men and women, but in his resurrection and exaltation as God's son, giving fresh hope for us all. May we each be inspired, encouraged, and empowered in faith by our worship with Jesus this precious night. **Amen.**