

Pausing this Lent at the Gates of Gethsemane

Joe McCormack

*Editor's Note: With Ash Wednesday just around the corner, Emmanuel Magazine is pleased to offer a short Lenten reflection by Joe McCormack, an associate of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament from Highland Heights, Ohio, and regular contributor to the Congregation's Daily Eucharist Reflections online. McCormack was, for many years, a teacher of literature and writing. He continues to write in retirement and, when not expressing himself in words, does so as a self-described "fledgling watercolorist." He encourages readers here to embrace new ways of observing the holy days of Lent as well as old ones, and to treat them as opportunities for action as much as contemplation. To follow Jesus into the Garden of Gethsemane, he suggests, transforms Lent from a season we passively allow to wash over us into something we **do** to experience its beauty and sanctity more fully. MED*



The approach of another Lenten season gives us reason to recall how we spent these forty days last year—if can we even can. If we *can't*, maybe it's time for a change in our routines of Lenten piety to make them more memorable. We might, for example, choose something other than giving up coffee, candy or anything else we've previously tried, although the giving-up seemed right, because, well, it's just what one does.

We could participate in the Stations of the Cross, whether by walking the path of Jesus' ascent to Calvary in church or by taking steps alongside him through meditation in the comfort of our homes. Either invites us into a theater of the mind wherein we can accompany Jesus through the final moments of his life, the suffering he endured along the so-called "Via Dolorosa," and the criminal's death that ultimately awaited him.

It's all so harrowing.

Not to be overlooked, however, are those segments of the Passion Story taken from the Gospels of Matthew and Mark that precede all this. In them we find a Jesus who prays to his Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. We are asked to join his followers in “staying a while [with him] and keeping watch” (Matthew 26:40). We can imagine olive trees all around us that muffle any noise from the nearby streets of Jerusalem and shade us from the heat of the day. It is a moment of isolation but of not being alone. God is with us, after all, and we have entered a state of being connected to others who are suffering and in need.

Gardens and wilderness settings, like deserts, appear repeatedly in Sacred Scripture. Both can be enigmatic. For the wayfarer, they are places to listen for God's presence. Jesus himself, whom we can think of as the “Divine Wayfarer,” is recorded by Matthew (4:1-11), Mark (1:12-13) and Luke (4:1-13) as having retreated to the desert to escape the distractions of the world. He prayed and preached on mountain tops, and, near the very end of his life, retreats to Gethsemane.

[We know that at the conclusion of Lent,] flowers will bloom in our sanctuaries, and the sound of trumpets may announce the Good News. First, however, we must “walk the talk” of our faith and pause for a time at the gates of Gethsemane.

We might follow him there in our minds this Lent or wander into the woods, all the while singing Daniel's canticle blessing to creation (Daniel 3:57-88, 56). The garden

will give up its secret if only we stay a while before picking up our own crosses on life's journey, falling and failing along the way. We might even pick up the crosses of others. We may find time to sit before the Real Presence of Jesus in a chapel or church to recall how Jesus spent time in the garden praying to his Father for the strength to endure his journey to the cross.

Lent is certainly a time for interior reflection, but eventually we must get up and move. We are needed elsewhere. Our work is not competed. My hope is that this Lent will prepare all of us to go forward in faith. We carry concerns and worries on our backs, but onward we must go, Amidst the darkest of our Lenten moments, we know that the sights and sounds of Easter await us. If the statues in our churches are covered—and ancient, Catholic tradition, they will be unveiled. Flowers will bloom in our sanctuaries, and the sound of trumpets may announce the Good News. First, however, we must “walk the talk” of our faith and pause for a time at the gates of Gethsemane.

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