

### WHEN DISCIPLES SLEEP

--This evening, what we have just read concerning that evening is much more than just something that happened to Jesus--though, according to our tradition, it does happen to him back then.

Heart heavy with notable grief and ambivalence, Jesus goes to Gethsemane's Garden, sorrowful about the fact that soon he is to be betrayed and denied and abandoned, seeking from God an alternate path to the one that he plainly understands he is on. "Father," he is reported to pray, "all things are possible to You; remove this cup from me" (14.36a).

Now, there's a Jesus we can identify with, one who is pulling away from the almost certain unpleasantness and pain that are at hand. Surely--we would reason, if we were in his shoes--no one in his right mind would ever steer straight into such suffering as that.

Yet, we are told, Jesus submits, adding to his desperate request the haunting words, "Yet not what I will, but what You will [be done]" (14.36b).

Now, there's a Jesus we can be impressed by, a Jesus we can admire--one who knows the agony that is at hand and, if it is truly God's will, surrendering himself to it.

--As compelling as all this is at center stage, however, our attention this night is drawn elsewhere, somewhere off to the side, there at the edge of the Garden that night, where there are three dozing forms on the ground. Do you see them there?

Jesus has taken with him to that Garden a trio of his most trusted disciples--Peter and James and John. Certainly, he probably thinks to himself, with them he is in good hands for these moments alone. His instructions to them are quite specific and straightforward: "Remain here, and watch" (14.32,34). Nothing especially confusing about that.

However, not once, not twice, but three times he comes and finds them sleeping. Jesus' simple request of them to be wakeful, to remain watchful, to be alert and attentive to what is occurring around them, is something that they are incapable of sustaining, unable to achieve.

Perhaps if they had delivered that, they would have spotted the advance of that band intent on capturing Jesus and dragging him away. Perhaps if they had been able to accomplish that, they could have informed Jesus, and he could have slipped away into the maze of dark streets nearby and gone on carrying out his ministry to humanity for a lot longer. Imagine the additional good that could have resulted!

As interesting a point as it is to ponder, though, we know how the story actually turns out. The directive that Jesus gives them is one that none of the three finds humanly possible to fulfill.

Jesus asks his disciples for a few hours of consciousness, and each time, not just one of them, not

just two of them, but all three of them lapse into unconsciousness. “For their eyes,” the account reads, “were very heavy” (14.40). Indeed.

When the disciples sleep, the Lord is left exposed and vulnerable. When the disciples sleep, the Lord is betrayed. When the disciples sleep, the Lord is arrested and taken away.

--This evening, what we have just read concerning that evening is much more than just something that happens to Jesus back then. There is something archetypal about it, something fundamental and universal about it, something that transfers message from back then to right now, something that carries meaning from them to us.

That implies that, as it were, looking through this early memory concerning Gethsemane, we can plainly see the outlines of our own situations and predicaments.

Given that, the present meaning of this old story seems pretty obvious: Jesus still asks his disciples to remain awake and be watchful, and his disciples still struggle with falling asleep--drifting away into forgetfulness as to who exactly they are, constantly distracted and excusing themselves from what they are to be doing, confused about and resistant outright to what God has created them, gifted them, and called them to--all manifestations of the undependability of our wakefulness or watchfulness.

As our world plainly shows, in our own ways, in our own time, when disciples sleep, the Lord whom we say we follow is still left exposed and vulnerable to those who work against him, the Lord whom we say we trust continues to be betrayed into the hands of adversaries, the Lord whom we say we love goes on being arrested, bound, and carried away. When disciples sleep--“dead to the world,” we say--the world stands only to lose and to suffer.

Jesus couldn't be more right: “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (14.38). And, in all honesty, sometimes even the spirit isn't all that willing, either. When disciples sleep, you see, nothing good comes of it, nothing good comes out of it. If there is an original sin, then surely it must be this basic unconsciousness to which we are so inclined.

Therefore, Jesus' questions to a drowsy-eyed Peter or James or John inevitably register in our own hearts: After all that you have seen for yourself and all that you know, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest?” (14.41) After all that you have experienced of me, “Are you asleep? [Can] you not watch one hour?” (14.37).

Well, fellow disciples, can we?  
Just how heavy are our eyes?