Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives; not a garden really. Today, it is a small grove of ancient olive trees. Gethsemane, the name means “oil press.” A place so memorable that each of the Gospel writers refers to it. A place of pilgrimage since before the third century. In fact, there is an ancient staircase cut in the rock. Numerous steps, very large and well-preserved, have been discovered above the present Garden of Gethsemane.

In this walled garden grove are ancient and gnarly olive trees, the largest of which is over twenty six feet around. Dark branches reaching ... reaching. Multiple trunks, some seem almost to support the older withering branches of others. The oldest of these trees date back to the seventh century. They are graftings from a single tree. Although they were not found there in the time of Jesus, they may be the offshoots of one which witnessed his agony.

His agony ... Yes, this is the place the church has traditionally named as the site of Jesus’ agony. Not on the cross, but in the garden. Not the suffering of a tortured body, but the agony of a tortured mind and spirit facing the inevitable ... the unimaginable.

Who among us hasn’t found ourselves in a situation where the inevitable seems impossible? Where the unavoidable seems unimaginable? Who hasn’t said to God, at some time, “Please, O God, no.” “Why, Lord, why?” The most difficult thing in such a situation may be its crushing inevitability. You want to escape from your life which suddenly feels like an oncoming train about to run you down. It is the shock you feel when you receive a frightening diagnosis from your physician. When you are laid off from a job. When a loved one dies or a relationship ends. And you say to yourself, “This cannot be happening.” These situations may throw us into a panic, which makes finding God’s will far more difficult. At the very moment we want to feel most tethered in God we feel unmoored. And sometimes panic and fear feel like the only rational responses.

As I stood in the Garden of Gethsemane, I imagined Jesus in prayer. This man who was calm in the face of storms, agitated crowds and angry religious leaders, demoniacs and lepers. This man is overwrought in distress that is so intense that it feels as if it may kill him. And so he goes to his familiar garden, throws himself on the ground, and begs God for mercy, clarity, and steadfast determination.

The scripture gives us a very brief synopsis of his prayer. You see, the prayer was not, just a few sentences. Jesus prayed for an hour; not once, not twice, but three times. The church has traditionally call this the “Hour of Agony.” After asking the disciples to join him in prayer, maybe even to support him in prayer, he goes a short distance alone and throws himself to the ground, overcome by the horror of a great darkness. The humanity of the Son of God trembles in that hour of agony. The awful moment had come; that moment which was to decide the destiny of the world. The fate of humanity quaked in the balance. It was not yet too late. He could wipe the bloody sweat from His brow and leave to a place of safety, living out his life in obscurity and peace.

As I stood in Gethsemane, I imagined Jesus, lying on the ground in prayer. Clutching the large stone on which he lies as if to prevent himself from being drawn away from God. The chilling dew of night falls upon his prostrate body but he doesn’t even notice it. From his pale lips come the bitter cry.
Abba, Father, for you all things are possible. Please, there must be another way. Must I drink the bitter cup of humiliation? Must the innocent suffer the consequences of sin to save the guilty? Father, please, take this cup from me for I do not want to taste its burning poison. Help me. I am losing my resolve. Why must I die? Is this the only way? Why am I so afraid to finish what I have begun? O my Father, how can I pray to be saved from this hour, since this hour is the purpose for which I came? I’ve done everything you’ve asked. But, I need more time, Father. Can’t I have more time … time to teach … time to heal … time to turn your people to you. I’m not finished. There’s so much more that needs to be done. And I don’t want to leave them … My friends and followers. Your people who have meant so much to me. Those I have blessed and those who have blessed me. Will you leave your sheep without a shepherd? It is so hard to say good-bye.

The human heart longs for compassion in suffering. Jesus felt this longing to the very depths of his being. In the agony of his soul, he got up and came to his disciples with a yearning to hear some words of comfort from those whom he had so often comforted in their own sorrow and distress. And they were sleeping. Jesus found himself to be desperately alone. And as I stood there by the grove of olive trees, I wondered, “When have I closed my eyes on Jesus’ agony? When have I been less that compassionate toward his suffering?” I know that I would much rather shout “Hosanna” on Palm Sunday and “Alleluia” on Easter Sunday than face the agony and suffering of my Lord. I was moved to deep confession and filled with remorse.

After admonishing his friends, Jesus returned to his place of solitary prayer.

O my God, it’s been three years. Three years, I have done as you said. There were times when things seems to be going so well. Multitudes receiving your word of grace and salvation. Then, I was inspired. But now … now … I am tired and frightened. What good will be gained by my sacrifice? It seems so hopeless … the ingratitude. I have been rejected, betrayed. Even my friends don’t stay awake in my time of need. If I should die … see this through … if I do the things you have asked of me, how can I be sure that I will not die in vain? I feel so alone … so alone. And yet, I trust you and I surrender myself to you … to your will. Not what I want, but what you want. I do this, trusting that you will be with me. No matter what, you will see me through. But … just one more thing … Tell me you love me, Dad. Let me feel your arms around me.

My friends, the invitation to surrender, to accept our cup, to acknowledge the inevitability of suffering in our lives, and to step onto the path of sacrifice, comes in the context of our relationship with our gracious and loving God. We trust that God will be with us in all that we do and all that we suffer. We do not simply grit our teeth, clench our fists and push on alone and unaided. We are never alone. God is with us; sustaining us, guiding us, strengthening us for the path ahead.

Suffering is always difficult to understand. It may have been difficult for Jesus. It was certainly difficult for the disciples. But they will understand it completely … in three days.