

“Cursing”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 3, 2024

3rd Sunday in Lent

Psalm 96:1-9

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Mark 11:12-21

Introduction

While, according to our calendar, we are four weeks from Easter; in our walk through Mark’s gospel, we are now in holy week. This morning’s reading is preceded by the Triumphal entry of Jesus, which we will return to read on Palm Sunday. But over these next three Sundays, we will be looking at stories of the days immediately before Jesus’ arrest, trial and crucifixion.

The author of our bible study book, AJ Levine, says about this: “As we move into the Passion narrative, enigmatic sayings and actions return. Mark shows wisdom in encouraging readers to understand, interpret, and reconsider...I see Mark as deliberately provocative, drawing readers in and then encouraging conversations about and continuity of the stories...Let the conversations continue!”¹

Read Mark 11:12-21

Mark is known for sandwiching his stories. Here the Temple scene – where Jesus overturns the tables of the money changers – is framed by the cursing of the fig tree on one day and finding it withered on the next.

The cleansing of the Temple story is found in all four gospels. Like Mark, Matthew and Luke set it during Holy Week; while in John’s gospel, it takes place earlier in the story. There are some other differences: John describes Jesus fashioning a whip of cords to drive the sacrificial animals out of the Temple court; an act that, for some, conjures an image of violence. But Jesus is not whipping the people, he is freeing the animals from those who are profiting off them.

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Gospel of Mark: A Beginner’s Guide to the Good News*, p. 87

In Mark's version, Jesus' actions are more clearly non-violent. The overturning of tables is a teaching moment: Jesus laments how this house of prayer has been turned into a hide-out for thieves. The business that is taking place is unholy; in his presence, the Temple could "change its nature, from sin to sanctity, corruption to compassion."²

On his way with the disciples from Bethany to the Temple, we are told that Jesus is hungry. Mark, it seems, wants us to understand the human side of Jesus. Upon seeing the fig tree, Jesus approaches it, looking for something to eat, but finds no fruit because it was not the right season. Apparently angered, Jesus says to the tree – but for the disciples to hear – *may no one ever eat fruit from you again*.

Walking by the same tree the next morning – that is, the day after Jesus overturned the tables in the Temple – Peter notices that the fig tree has withered. Surely, this would have made the disciples – and Mark's readers then and now – uncomfortable. Why did the tree need to die? How could it have been expected to bear fruit out of season? Shouldn't Jesus, who had the power to multiply loaves and fish to feed thousands, have found another way to satisfy his hunger and spare this innocent tree?

The other gospel writers may have shared our discomfort. In Matthew's version of this story, the tree withers immediately, before the disciples' eyes; it becomes just another example of how Jesus can defy the laws of nature, like walking on water or calming a stormy sea. In Luke's gospel, this story is transformed into a parable: a landowner wants to cut down a tree that is not bearing fruit, but the gardener pleads to give it another chance, promising to add fertilizer to the roots and find out if the tree is worth saving.

When our Will was a student at John Carroll, one of his neighbors in University Heights was an elderly woman who had a fig tree in her yard. In the early fall, it was teeming with fresh ripe figs that – warm from the sun – would melt in mouth. Our climate is not conducive to fig trees so, each year, her son would come and dig up her tree and bury it in the ground; then come back in the spring to dig up and plant it again, as if resurrected from its tomb.

² Levine, p. 92

Some interpreters will say that the fig tree, in Mark's gospel, is meant to represent the Temple; and that because it is no longer bearing good fruit, it cannot live. Others have said that the tree symbolizes the Jewish people who, because they failed to uphold God's covenant sacred, and were unwilling to change in the presence of Jesus, are destined to be replaced by the church. Or, it may be that Jesus intends us to read forward to Mark 13:28, where he says, *from the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth leaves, you know that the summer is near*; indicating that the time, the *Kairos*, of Jesus' final judgment has come.

Jesus will say to the disciples, in chapter 13, that not one stone of the Temple would be left upon another, that all will be thrown down. Historically, this is correct. By the time Mark's gospel is written, in 70 CE, the Romans will have destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. What might have seemed imaginable – what Jesus saw as unholy and corrupt – would come to fruition. Like a tree that bears no fruit, the Temple had withered and died at its roots.

What should we do with our discomfort with these stories of the Temple and fig tree? As much as we might appreciate Mark showing us the human side of Jesus – hungry for food, angry that God's house of prayer has become a den of robbers – we might cringe at his actions. First, we need to remember what these stories are not: they are not justifications for us to participate in environmental degradation or violently overturning practices – religious or not – that we might deem corrupt. We are called as followers of Christ and members of his church to be stewards of creation and to build one another up in love, not tear each other down in anger. Proclaiming the non-violent ways of Jesus best serves the world in need of peace.³

Our discomfort should also help us to remember where we are in the story of Jesus' life. In Jerusalem, in these stories about the days before Jesus will be betrayed and arrested, tried and beaten, denied and deserted, then hung on a cross; Mark reminds us of the agonizing road that Jesus had to walk; and of the awesome sacrifice being made on our behalf.

³ Bruce Gillette from *The Presbyterian Outlook*

Walking the Stations of the Street at North Church on Friday evening and listening to the voices describing the way it was then, in the final days and hours of Jesus' life; and the way it is now, for people who likewise suffer from poverty, homelessness, incarceration, and addiction, the ugliness and brutality of the Passion – and modern examples of injustice and violence – powerfully hit home. But I also heard how God does not leave us at the tomb, but tells us, as Christ's disciples, to go ahead to Galilee; to return to our neighborhoods and communities to practice mercy and compassion; to embrace the suffering and offer hope to the hurting.

During these weeks of the Lenten season, we are meant to hear again that new life can only come after death; that the Son was sent because of God's great love for the world; and that we have been invited to walk this journey with Jesus – which sometimes means bearing a cross-like burden – so that we might accompany him in life beyond the grave. As Jesus offers his body and blood for each of us, we are to offer our full selves – mind, soul, and strength – to fulfill our call to love God and one another.

While the stench of violence and death may linger around us, Jesus invites us to come to His Table: not one that is corrupt and needs overturning, but a table set with mercy, justice, and acceptance. Here, we are welcome; here, the cost has already been paid. Come, therefore, all you beloved children of God; taste and see that the Lord is good. Amen.