

22 July 2018

Jerusalem
Mark 12-13; Micah 3:9-12

Jerusalem was the hub of the Jewish faith. There are psalms that promise that it can never be destroyed, because it is the seat of God. But not everyone agreed with that optimistic view. Jesus didn't, as we'll see today. And eight centuries before Jesus, the Judean prophet Micah had this to say. We read Micah 3:9-12:

*⁹ Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob
and chiefs of the house of Israel,
who abhor justice
and pervert all equity,
¹⁰ who build Zion with blood
and Jerusalem with wrong!
¹¹ Its rulers give judgment for a bribe,
its priests teach for a price,
its prophets give oracles for money;
yet they lean upon the Lord and say,
'Surely the Lord is with us!
No harm shall come upon us.'
¹² Therefore because of you
Zion shall be ploughed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
and the mountain of the house a wooded height.*

The day before, Jesus and his friends had entered Jerusalem in triumph. Crowds roared and waved palm branches and shouted *Hosheana!* – “Lord, save us” – to the gratification of his friends, who had been longing for this moment from the start. This was it! The moment when Jesus would restore the throne of David in an independent Israel. Then Jesus entered the temple, watched silently for a minute, turned around and left. That was it. So much for the coronation.

So now it's the next morning. Jesus and his friends have stayed overnight in Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem, and now they head back into the city. Jesus sets a determined pace, but just outside the city, they pass a fig tree, and Jesus stops abruptly. He looks at the tree, then walks over to it. His friends look at each other. It isn't fig season. What is he doing? Jesus looks at the branches, then says, “You were planted here for a reason. If you won't bear fruit, then may you wither and die.” Without another word he turns and resumes his march toward the city.

Through the streets where the day before the crowds had thrown their robes before him Jesus strides up the hill to the temple itself. There, in the outer court, the pigeons and lambs and oxen are cooped and caged and penned. Nearby are the bankers, ready to change the foreign currency of pilgrims to the Jerusalem temple coin, for a small fee. And overseeing it all are the priests who profit from every transaction. Jesus doesn't hesitate. He turns over a banker's table, scattering coins all over the yard. He kicks open a gate, and sheep rush out, baa-ing and bleating. A herdsman holding a whip runs over to stop Jesus, but Jesus just takes the whip from his hand. “Get out!” he shouts, cracking the whip. “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of

prayer for all nations!’ But you have turned it into a den of thieves!” In a few minutes, the courtyard is empty. “That’s better,” Jesus says, tossing the whip aside. “This temple was put here to bear fruit. If it won’t, let it wither and die.” That evening, as they return to the house in Bethany, they pass by the fig tree that Jesus had rebuked that morning. It is shriveled, dry, leafless, barren, twisted, and dead.

Now the reason Jesus and his friends came to Jerusalem just now is that it’s Passover week, and they’re staying through the holiday, so the next day they’re back in the temple. This time, the priests are waiting for him. As he sits in the unusually quiet and reverent outer court, a delegation approaches. “You, Galilean! We have a question for you! By what authority do you do these things?”

It’s a fair question, but a tricky one. If Jesus says he has no authority beyond himself, then he looks silly to the crowds. If he says he acts on the authority of God, he sounds arrogant and blasphemous. Jesus replies, “I’ll answer that, if you’ll answer a question for me. Who did John the Baptizer act for? Was it just for himself, or was it for God?” And now the priests have the problem. They had opposed John publicly, but – especially now that he’s dead – all the people treat him as a martyred prophet. If the priests say he was from God, then Jesus can ask why they rejected him. But they can’t say he was just a man, not in front of the crowds. “We don’t know,” they reply.

“So neither of us is getting our question answered today.” Jesus calls the crowd closer. “Let me tell you a story. Once there was a land owner who planted a beautiful vineyard. He did everything a man could do to make it fruitful – dug cisterns for water, built fences, everything. Then he let it out to tenant farmers, in return for a share of the fruit. But they never paid. The tenants kept it all for themselves and grew comfortable. The landowner sent a servant to remind the tenants of their covenant. They beat the servant and sent him back empty-handed. The landowner sent another servant; they treated him worse. Finally, after several more messengers, the master said, ‘I’ll send my son this time. They’ll respect him, at least.’ But when the tenants saw the son approaching, they said, ‘That’s the son. He must have no one else to send. Let’s kill him, and the vineyard will be ours forever.’ So they did.”

Jesus looks around at the crowd. “So what do you think a master ought to do to tenants who refuse to keep their covenant?” No one answers. “He’ll take the land away from them and give it to someone else, don’t you think?” Jesus raises his eyebrows as he looks at the priests, who suddenly realize he’s talking about them. They want to kill him right there, but the crowd is all around him, hanging on his every word. The priests turn sharply and leave.

Next they try to trap him into siding with the hated Romans. Bringing with them some Herodians – supporters of the puppet king of the Romans – they ask Jesus in front of the crowds, “We know that you’re an honest man, who’s always speaks the truth, even if it’s uncomfortable. So tell us: Should a good Jew pay Roman taxes?”

Jesus sighs. “Any of you have a Roman coin on you? Ah, good. I thought you might.” He takes the coin, then shows it to them. “Whose picture is on it?”

“Caesar’s,” they say.

He flips the coin back. “Then give to Caesar what’s his. And give to God what is God’s.”

So the next day, they try again. This time it's a group of Sadducees. Now, the Sadducees are the old guard of the Jewish faith. They trace their lineage back to David's high priest, Zadok, a thousand years earlier, and haven't really changed their theology since then. For instance, they don't accept newfangled theological ideas, like this notion that there's a resurrection after death. They know that Jesus, that liberal, has talked about the resurrection, so they build their trap on that. "Now Jesus, you know in the Torah it says that if a man dies childless, his widow should marry his brother, so that she'll be cared for and have children. So, let's say that happens. A woman marries a man, who dies. So she marries his brother. Then he dies – still no kids. So she marries the next brother, then the next. She marries *seven* different brothers before she dies herself. So . . . in this resurrection you talk about, which one will the woman be married to? Because she married all of them."

Deep sigh. "Why would you think that in the resurrection she would be married to anyone at all?" Jesus asks. "What makes you think that the rules and contracts and social positions that we make so much of on earth mean anything at all in the resurrection? They don't." The Sadducees look at each other, then start to withdraw, but Jesus doesn't let them. "But you're really asking if there's a resurrection at all, aren't you? All right. Remember when God spoke to Moses at the burning bush, how he identified himself? He said, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Not the God who *used* to be their God before they died. He said, *I Am*. He's not God of the dead, but of the living."

One of the scribes who had come along to see Jesus trapped and discredited steps forward. He's never heard anyone answer questions like this. "Sir?" he asks. "Which of the commandments is the greatest of all?"

Jesus looks into this scribe's eyes, then smiles. This one isn't a trap; this is a real question. He says, "The first commandment is this: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, being, mind, and strength. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself."

The scribe stares, then nods. "You're right. So incredibly right. To love God wholly and our neighbors unselfishly – it's more important than every burnt offering that's ever been given."

Jesus' smile broadens. "You're very close to the kingdom, my friend." He turns to the gathered crowd. "Do you see this man? He came to accuse; instead he humbled himself and listened. Be like that. Do not be like the priests who glory in their high position, their special clothes, the seats of honor at feasts. They have wrapped themselves in religion and forgotten God. They have chosen their path and in doing so have chosen their fate."

On the way out of the temple that day, they pass by the collection box at the main entrance. *Clash! Clang!* A wealthy man has just dumped a sack of coins into the box, now is looking around to make sure everyone heard. Jesus starts to turn away, but then sees another person at the box, a poor widow dropping in two small coins. Jesus says, "Did you see that? That poor woman? She gave more than anyone today." His friends look confused, so Jesus says, "It was all she had. And all you have is always the most."

Outside the city, Jesus stops and looks back. The setting sun is gleaming reddish orange on the massive walls of the temple, towering high above the rest of the city. He stands and gazes in silence for a moment.

"I bet I know what you're thinking," says one of his friends. "What a magnificent sight!"

“Not exactly,” Jesus says quietly. “See those stones? Within your lifetime, they will be torn down. Not one will be left in place.” His friends stare at him, aghast. He says, “There are hard days ahead for Israel. And for you. War is coming, and persecution for everyone who follows me. You will be arrested, tried, beaten, betrayed. False messiahs will arise and claim to be the way for you. Don’t listen to them. Just stay true to what I’ve taught you, and stay awake.”

“When will all this take place?” asks Andrew.

“Wrong question,” Jesus says. “Don’t ask when. Nobody knows when. Even I don’t know when. Just know that hardship awaits. Do not trust in those stones, or in any structure than people make. They will all fail you. But know this: in the end, all will be righted and you will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds. Until then, stay true and stay awake. Because tomorrow, everything changes.”

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A final word: We in the church do love our structures, our buildings, our capitals, our institutions. And there’s nothing wrong with that. We need buildings and structures and institutions; they help us to present the story of Christ more effectively. We just need to remember that the building and structures – our Jerusalems – are not the story itself. They are just tools, and temporary. The story is forever, though. Hold on to that.