
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

Looking Around at Everything

A Sermon by

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Scripture: Mark 11:1-11

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🎵 God is still speaking,

Jerusalem is a very old city. Built on a hill, one is always going up to Jerusalem. If you were a Jew coming to Jerusalem for Passover from some other part of the Roman Empire than Israel, you might have taken a boat and docked at Jaffa, today Tel Aviv. You would have joined a caravan for a three-day trek (today an hour by car) to Jerusalem. And if you were arriving in 33 AD, you would have seen, from some distance away, the newly completed temple, built by Herod the Great, the King of the Jews, appointed as the sole ruler of Israel by the Roman Empire. In the 18th year of King Herod's rule, about 20-19 BCE, he began a massive reconstruction project which amounted to expanding the Temple built 500 years before by the Jews as they returned from exile. The whole building project, which lasted about 80 years, longer than King Herod's reign, expanded the whole of the Temple Mount, taking a steeply sloping piece of land and building an entire level platform, four and a half football fields in length and width, to hold a Temple which would reach some 10 to 16 stories high.

Imagine coming to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, celebrating your story of once being slaves in Egypt and being led to freedom. And while you are still slaves in your own land, slaves now to the Roman Empire, you come to gather in hope. You, hundreds, thousands of Jews, come home to Jerusalem. For some, it was a once in a lifetime journey. As you draw close, the last few miles, you suddenly see the gleaming white marble, gilded with gold. Majestic. Holy. The focal point of all of Jerusalem. Even the three great towers near King Herod's palace were hardly to be noticed.

You, the pilgrim, would find lodging with family or a small hotel outside the city's gates, or merely pitch your belongings somewhere among the massive crowds and throngs of people. The next day you would approach the temple entrance on the south side of the complex. You would check your donkey at the gate. If you were a man, you would find a mikva, a place of ritual bath in order to cleanse and purify yourself.

You would ascend a staircase three stories high and find yourself in the Court of Gentiles, a bazaar, with vendors selling souvenirs, sacrificial animals, and food. Priests would be present directing and advising what kind of sacrifices were to be performed. You would change your money, changing your Roman coins for Jewish Temple money. But be careful. It seems that those priests were profiting "at the expense of the devotion of the poor. The peasants of Palestine sacrificed and saved to make their offerings at Passover, but when they had to exchange their Roman coins for Temple currency, they often got cheated. Poor families raised animals to take for a sacrifice, and that animal represented at least one meal they would have to do without. The animal had to be without blemish to be offered to God. Priests often found faults and forced the family to buy another from the sellers in the temple, and, of course, the priests got their cut."¹

You could then go into the inner courts. From the Court of Gentiles, Jews could enter the Temple's grounds, the Court of Women, where Jews, male and female, even lepers, were welcome and where there would be constant dancing, singing and music. "Come into his courts with singing." Next came the Court of the Israelites, welcoming exclusively Jewish men to enter where they could see the animal sacrifices made by the high priests in the Court of Priests.

Finally came the Temple itself, containing the Holy of Holies, the Ark of the Covenant, which held the stone commandments, Aaron's rod and manna. Only the Levitical high priests entered the Holy

¹ Hope for Peace & Justice [mike.piazza@h4pj.org] Daily Devotional, Week Twelve, Day Three, April 1, 2009.

of Holies, once a year, on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, sprinkling the blood of the sacrificial bull and the sacrificial lamb.

Mark's Gospel says, "Then Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve."

If you read only the Gospel of Mark, these verses sound like it might be Jesus' first trip to Jerusalem. According to Mark, Jesus was from Nazareth and was baptized in the Jordan. Jesus was in the Judean wilderness and then went to Galilee for his ministry. Jesus' ministry was in Capernaum, around the Sea of Galilee; he went to Tyre and Sidon (Lebanon), Caesarea Philippi (Syria), Judea beyond the Jordan (Jordan), and from there, on the road up to Jerusalem, through Jericho, to Bethany, and the Mount of Olives, to find a colt, tied near a door, because 'the Lord needs it and will send it back immediately' when he is done with it.

Palm Sunday lesson #1: When you steal a colt, give it back when you are done.

Palm Sunday lesson #2: It could have been called Cloak Sunday, because the disciples covered the colt with their cloaks. Later in church traditions, especially in those places where it was harder to get palms, it was often called Branch Sunday, with Christians using boughs of native trees like box, willow or yew.

Palm Sunday lesson #3: In Mark, Jesus entered Jerusalem, went to the Temple, looked around at everything because it was late, and went back to Bethany with his disciples. 'He looked around at everything.' Did he say to his disciples, 'You wait here. I'll be right back.'? Did he take the ritual bath or walk right past, dusty, dirty, tired, unclean? Did he ascend the three flights of stairs and look around the marketplace, booths and stalls now empty, sellers gone for the day, priests, their shifts now done, only a few, women probably, sweeping up the debris from the day? Did he greet them with a smile, a kind word, a wink and a nod knowing 'a woman's work is never done.'? Did Jesus cross into the inner courts? Did he approach the towering, magnificent Holy of Holies?

Mark says only, "He looked around at everything."

Imagine now that Mark is telling this story and you are a Jew listening very carefully in 70 AD. Jesus came into Jerusalem, looked around at everything, got the full lay of the land. In just a few minutes (two chapters later to us), Gospel writer Mark is telling you that the disciples said to Jesus, "What big buildings these are!" Jesus says, "They won't be here for long."

Mark the Gospel was "written the year that Jerusalem and the temple were re-conquered and destroyed by the Roman Empire, and the Jewish war of revolt led to its virtually inevitable climax."² The Jews were defeated again.

To a discouraged and beaten down people,

To a few believers trying to hang on to memories of Jesus,

² Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, p. 193.

To Christ community struggling to remain a viable and transformative presence, Mark tells the story again. “Repent”, the story begins. “Prepare the way”. “Remember the one with whom God was well pleased?”

Do not give up the journey. The journey is one of discipleship. The journey is one of dying to the old ways and being born into new ways of being.³ You can do it. We can do it. We can follow the Way Jesus taught. We enter the fullness of God’s love when we follow the Way. God has not abandoned us. We need not be afraid.

Jesus is the bread of life who satisfies our deepest hungers.

Jesus is the light shining in the darkness who brings enlightenment.

Jesus lifts us out of death into life.

Jesus is the full disclosure of what a life full of God—life filled with the Spirit—looks like.⁴

This is Palm Sunday and we have been on this Journey to the Cross since Ash Wednesday, February 25. It was early in March when I was doing a hospital visit when I came back through the lobby on the way back to my car, and as I passed the hospital gift shop, I saw the sign, “Easter: 20 percent off”. Now, I know times are tough for retailers, and you have to draw in your customers. Still I wondered, “Easter: 20 percent off”. The first week of March.

Which 20% would you take off?

Take off Ash Wednesday?

Make it 32 days rather than 40 days of Lent?

Take off Palm Sunday? Maundy Thursday? Good Friday really gets in the way.

Easter vigil, all that time in the tomb? We could really save some time there.

Mark tells his people and tells us too, Jesus purposefully, with certainty and determination, looked around at everything and still made the decision to go to the cross. Jesus’ faith in God allows us the same faith in God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Borg, p. 195.

⁴ Borg, p. 218.