

Monday

After spending the night again in Bethany, Jesus walked back into Jerusalem early Monday morning. There is no mention of a crowd following Jesus today, and I wonder if Jesus purposefully woke his disciples and left early to have some peace and quiet? For whatever reason, this walk to Jerusalem must have seemed a stark contrast to the day before. On this quiet walk through the morning dusk, listening to the birds waking up, I can picture each disciple lost in thought, reminiscing about what had happened on this very road yesterday.

During this morning walk, Matthew and Mark both record an encounter between Jesus and a fig tree. Jesus was hungry (another sign, perhaps, that they left so early that no one was up to serve breakfast), and they walked past a fig tree that had leaves on it. Even though it was early in Spring, Jesus looked for fruit on the tree to eat, but finding none, cursed the fig tree, saying it would never bear fruit again. The disciples casually observe this interaction, and no one questions Jesus as to why he would expect to find figs so early in the season. Perhaps later this week, on Thursday night, this strange curse would make sense to the disciples, as Jesus would tell them, *"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me, you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers"* (John 15:5-6). Mark tells us that by Tuesday morning, the fig tree would be withered.

But back to Monday. Nothing else happened on the way to Jerusalem, and as Jesus arrives, he heads straight to the temple, where he encounters people who are buying, selling, and changing money. The area of the temple where this sort of commerce was taking place was the court of the Gentiles, which was the only part of the temple in which non-Jewish believers were allowed to go to worship. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record Jesus' rebuke to them as he vigorously flings their tables over and ushers them out of the temple. Jesus says, *"Is it not written: My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it a den of robbers"* (Mark 11:17).

Jesus is quoting from two different, Old Testament prophets, in this statement. The first is Isaiah 56:7 and the second is Jeremiah 7:11. Just yesterday, Jesus quoted a passage from Zechariah 9 that revealed his desire to win peace for all the nations. Now this quote from Isaiah specifically defends the rights of Gentiles to worship God in the temple, in the house of prayer. *"Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.' ... And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him, to love the name of the Lord, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations"* (Isaiah 56: 3, 6-7).

By removing the sellers and the money changers from the court of the Gentiles, Jesus is giving believers from all nations the ability to come to the temple to worship God. Jesus is really sending home the point that He intends to provide access to God, through salvation, to all the nations, not just Israel.

The quote from Jeremiah about the den of robbers has another point, though. *“Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, ‘We are safe’ – safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord”* (Jer 7:9-11).

In contrast to God’s desire to extend salvation to all the nations, He is also calling out the Jews for their hypocrisy- they trust that simply being Jewish, being children of Abraham will keep them safe while they desecrate God’s temple and ignore the needs of other believers.

Tomorrow, Jesus will continue this thought into a long discourse called the “Seven Woes” to the Pharisees. God was watching the injustice happening in His temple in the time of Jeremiah, and here Jesus shows that He has been watching the injustice too- and the time has come to call out the injustice and physically remove the hypocrites from God’s house of prayer.

As Jesus’ words no doubt brought both of these prophetic passages to their minds, the chief priests and teachers of the law don’t appreciate Jesus pointing out their sins. And rather than repenting or even looking at the possibility that they had not used the temple according to God’s design, they looked for a way to kill Jesus. But by now, crowds had formed around Jesus once more, and Luke says, *“Yet they could not find any way to do it [kill Jesus] because all the people hung on his words”* (Luke 19:48). And as Jesus taught them more that day, they were amazed at his teaching. At the end of the day, Jesus heads back to Bethany to spend the night once more.

On this Monday, as we finish reflecting on Jesus’ passionate work to cleanse and restore the temple in Jerusalem as God’s house of prayer for all nations, let’s ask Jesus to do the same work in our own hearts, knowing that we, as followers of Jesus, are God’s temple. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:17, *“God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.”* I may not be selling doves in the temple for a profit, but there are so many ways that I let the sins of pride and selfishness set up shop in my heart. Thank goodness Jesus cares enough to set it the temples our hearts right.

In four days, Jesus would give up his very life to purify the temple of our hearts from sin. But if we rather choose, like the Pharisees, to defend, deny, or cover up our sins, Jesus’ words are only death to us, like his words to the fig tree. How important is it then, to remember that Jesus longs to wash us, his temple, clean? As we saw yesterday, Jesus is a gentle, good king, never one to force his ways upon us. This cleansing won’t happen unless we ask for it. If you are unsure

how to ask Jesus to purify the temple of your heart, I always find David's prayer in Psalm 51 helpful.

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! ... Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." --Psalm 51: 1-2, 7,10

Extra Reading: Matthew 21:12-22, Mark 11:12-26, Luke 19:45-48, Isaiah 56: 1-7, Jeremiah 7:1-11