

**Palm Sunday: Rebellion or Redemption?**  
**Matthew 16.21-23, John 11.16, Mark 11.1-21, Luke 19.37-48**

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This spring we've been walking through the New Testament book called the Book of Acts, which is a short history of the church in its first three decades following the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We've seen how, in the first few chapters of the book, one of the original twelve followers of Jesus, a fisherman named Peter, begins to emerge as one of the most prominent leaders among the disciples

In Acts 2 Peter was the one who stood up and preached to the crowds, in chapter 3 he was the one who healed a crippled man, and in chapter 4 and again in chapter 5 he was the one who stood up and spoke to the religious authorities as they threatened him and commanded him not to say anything more about this Jesus to anyone else.

And not just spoke, but spoke with boldness. He tells them that this Jesus, who they rejected and conspired to put to death on the cross, is actually the promised king and rescuer who through his death reconciles us to God, and through his resurrection makes the life and power and healing of God available for all those who turn from a life lived for self and entrust their lives to him.

His boldness, his cheerful courage and freedom, is obvious as he tells these religious authorities that this Jesus has final authority and they do not, that what they saw as the collapse of the ministry and influence of Jesus was in fact just the beginning, that their act of judgment upon Jesus is in fact an act of judgment on themselves, and that their life-taking of Jesus is actually life-giving, bringing life to those who turn and trust him.

But . . . just a couple of months before all of that, in the time leading up to the death of Jesus, we find this same Peter completely confused about who Jesus really is and what he is trying to accomplish and where all this is going, and even standing in the way of the very thing Jesus said the Father had ordained must happen in order for Jesus to complete his redemptive work

This week, during this time between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday, we'll be pausing in our series on Acts and stepping back in time just a few months in order to follow Peter through the events of Holy Week as he struggles to make sense of what Jesus is doing.

In order to better understand Peter's confusion, I think it's crucial that we begin our Holy Week series not with the events that took place on Palm Sunday, but by going back to an event that happened a few months earlier.

We find it in Matthew chapter 16, at the pivot moment in Jesus' ministry. Up to this point his ministry has centered largely on Galilee, and has focused primarily on his teaching and his healing ministries.

But this is the moment when things turn, and Jesus sets his eyes on Jerusalem and the culminating act of his ministry. His teaching and his miracles are both crucial ways that Jesus reveals God to us. But there is one more thing he must do to complete the mission he came to do – and that is not just to reveal God to us but to *reconcile* us to God. And that requires his death.

He tells his disciples about it for the first time in Matthew 16. Let's turn there.

Jesus asks his followers who people says that he is. John the Baptist, they say, or Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets.

### **Matthew 16.15-20**

Then he asked them, "But who do you say I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus replied, "You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you."

Then he sternly warned the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

### **Matthew 16.21**

From then on Jesus began to tell his disciples plainly that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, and that he would suffer many terrible things at the hands of the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but on the third day he would be raised from the dead.

This is the first time he tells them. The second time comes just a week later, right after the transfiguration, when he tells them again that the Son of Man must suffer and be rejected and put to death. (Matthew 17.12 and 22–23, Mark 9.12 and 30–32, and Luke 9:43–45).

After that point in his ministry, as Luke tells us in 9.51, "Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem". And it's on the way there that Jesus tells them a third time (Matthew 20:17–19, Mark 10:32–34, and Luke 18:31–34). He takes the disciples aside and tells them that when they get to Jerusalem he will be handed over to the religious authorities and they will condemn him, mock him, beat him, and kill him.

Let's go back to the first time he tells the disciples that it is necessary for him to suffer and die at the hands of the religious authorities. Look at Peter's reaction.

### **Matthew 16.22-23**

But Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him for saying such things. "Heaven forbid, Lord," he said. "This will never happen to you!" Jesus turned to Peter and said, "Get away from me, Satan! You are a dangerous trap to me. You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's."

Jesus responds to the two people who are speaking to him in this moment.

He responds to the Evil One. You may remember that, at the end of the forty days of temptation in the wilderness with which Jesus began his ministry, during which the Evil One tried to divert Jesus from fulfilling his mission, we're told that he left Jesus "until an opportune time" (Luke 4.13). Now, when Jesus sets his face toward his coming death, comes an opportune time. The Evil One speaks through Peter now, seeking again to tempt Jesus away from going to his death and completing his mission. To him Jesus says, "Be gone. Get lost."

And then Jesus responds to Peter, who is telling Jesus this can't happen, because he doesn't understand what Jesus has come to do. To Peter he says, "Get your thinking straight. You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's."

Let's just stay here for a bit.

Jesus implies there are two different ways of seeing things and making sense of them: seeing things from a human perspective or seeing them from God's perspective.

When I see things from a human point of view, I am at the center. I see things from my vantage point, with reference to me and my right here, right now, life. I see things through the lens of how they will impact *me*.

So I receive with joy those things that contribute to my ease and my benefit, and that I can easily understand, and I resist with energy those things that will require me to wait, or be put out, or that confuse me, to say nothing of those things that would cause me to incur cost or experience suffering. I see things with reference to me, in terms of what is good for my sake.

But when I see things from God's point of view, that means he is at the center, and I see things in terms of how they might serve him or accomplish his purposes or advance his cause.

Instead of seeing things through the lens of what costs or benefits me, or makes sense to me, I'm seeing them from the perspective of what serves him – what is good for his sake, without reference to me.

Emily Dickinson says, "Every Life Converges to some Centre." What is the center that your life converges on? Who is at the center of your life? For whose sake do you live?

So how does a human perspective affect how Peter hears Jesus? Jesus says the Son of Man "must suffer and die." But what he means and how Peter hears it are two different things.

For Peter, what he hears when Jesus says "he must suffer" is that it seems *inevitable*. If he persists in this course of action, colliding again and again with the religious authorities, causing offense, his death will be the inevitable consequence of his rebellion against them.

Jesus and the religious authorities are on a collision course. And in that power clash, at least as Peter understands it, only one can come out on top. So Peter says, "Never, Lord! We're not going to let that happen!"

But when Jesus says he must suffer and die, he means not that it is *inevitable* but that it is *necessary*. In order to fulfill his mission, in order to bring lost humanity home to God (I Peter 3.18), he *must* die. He has to offer up his life in exchange for ours, taking upon himself the penalty that is rightfully ours, in order to reconcile us to the Father. So Peter has framed the coming death of Jesus as the terrible consequence of a power clash between Jesus and the religious authorities.

"No!" says Jesus to Peter, "You're getting it all wrong!" The coming death of Jesus is not the inevitable cost of Jesus mutinying against the religious authorities. The religious authorities have mutinied against God, and the coming death of Jesus is the act by which God redeems believing humanity and judges those who reject him.

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Now let's travel forward from this clash between Jesus and Peter to the last days of Jesus' life.

On the first day of the week, the day we celebrate today, Palm Sunday, Jesus rides in on a donkey, as huge crowds wave palm branches and pave the road with their cloaks and shout (Mark 11.9-10 and Luke 19.38):

"Hosanna!"

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

"Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!"

"Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

John's gospel tells us that Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey was in fulfillment of a prophesy about the coming King that is found in Zechariah 9.9:

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!  
 Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!  
 See, your king comes to you,  
 righteous and victorious,  
 lowly and riding on a donkey,  
 on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Immediately there is harsh backlash from the very people we would hope would be quickest to recognize and welcome Jesus as the King that God promised – the religious authorities.

Luke 19.39-40:

Hearing the shouts of the people, some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!"  
 "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

And Matthew 21.15-16:

When the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were indignant.  
 "Do you hear what these children are saying?" they asked him.  
 "Yes," replied Jesus, "have you never read,  
 "From the lips of children and infants  
 you, Lord, have called forth your praise'?"

They too seem to be seeing things not from God's point of view, but from a human perspective.

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All of which brings us to a really odd and unexpected exchange that takes place the next day, the day after the triumphal entry.

Jesus and his disciples are staying in Bethany, and on their way to Jerusalem they pass through a small town called Bethphage, which just happens to mean House of the Unripe Figs.

We'll pick up in Mark 11..

**Mark 11.12-14**

The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.

Then a little bit later we come back around to this same fig tree and find out its fate.

### **Mark 11.18-21**

The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city. In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"

Let's stop there for a second. Has this moment every struck you as . . . um . . . unreasonable on the part of Jesus? That maybe his hangry response was just a bit disproportionate to the circumstances? I mean, it spells out that this isn't the season for figs! It wasn't the fig tree's fault that it had no fruit!

Jesus grew up in Israel, where virtually every home had a grape vine and an olive tree and a fig tree. He knows when figs arrives on fig trees as well as we know when to look for apples on apple trees. Why would he look for fruit when it wasn't fig season?!

Two reasons. Figs are treasured among people who live in the regions where they grow. They taste as sweet as honey, with tiny seeds that have a nutty flavor, and they have a wonderful, jam-like consistency, and they're rich in vitamins and minerals and low in calories. So walking past a fig tree is a little bit like driving past the Scones and Doilies bakery downtown. A hunger gets awakened in you, and you can't help but veer off the road and stop.

But still – Jesus knows the growing season for figs. This is the spring, when fig trees begin to form new branches, that will grow over the course of the summer and then bear fruit in the fall. Why would he look for figs when it isn't fig season?

Because, Jesus knows the growing *seasons* for figs. The Latin name for figs is *figus bifera*, which means *twice-bearing* figs. The first harvest, the *te'edah*, comes in the fall. But the second harvest, the *te'enei*, the sweeter of the two, and the one looked forward to the most because it is the first fruit that appears after the long winter, is the spring harvest.

This *te'enei* fruit is formed on the end of the previous year's branches, it grows through the winter, and it becomes sweet and ripe in springtime.

And that second growth is everyone's favorite, as the Old Testament attests. Both Micah 7.1 and Hosea 9.10 talk about people craving these early, out-of-season figs, and Isaiah 28.4 says:

like figs ripe before harvest—  
as soon as people see them and take them in hand,  
they swallow them.

Isn't that cool? Suddenly, with a little bit of cultural information, this unreasonable act of looking for figs out of season suddenly starts to make a whole lot more sense.

Okay, but to *curse* it just because there's no spring fruit? Doesn't that seem just a bit . . . extreme?

Well, that brings us to another bit of background connected to figs, and that is its symbolism. You know that Jesus loved to speak in parables. What we have here is actually an *enacted parable*, like the feeding of the five thousand, a parable told through actions rather than through words.

Let's fill in some of the symbolism and see if you can begin to understand the deeper meaning of this seemingly random and un-called-for moment.

First, about the meaning of fruit in general: in his parables, you may remember that Jesus often uses the idea of a tree bearing fruit as a symbol for the way that what is on the inside of a person inevitably finds its way out to the outside, expressing itself in their dealings with others. What goes on in the heart is determinative.

So, for example, Jesus teaches in Luke's gospel:

#### **Luke 6.43-45**

No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.

So in his stories Jesus uses fruit – good fruit, bad fruit, right fruit, wrong fruit, no fruit – as a symbol for the way our hearts express themselves in our actions. That's true in this enacted parable as well. That's part of the point he's making.

But then there's a second layer of meaning, that comes from the Old Testament, that has specifically to do with figs. Jeremiah and other Old Testament prophets use figs and fig trees to represent the spiritual leaders of the nation of Israel and the impact of their

ministry for good or for ill on the people of God. Jeremiah chapter 8 is a great example. Here are some excerpts:

### **Jeremiah 8.7-13**

My people do not know the requirements of the Lord. The lying pen of the scribes [that is, the teachers of the law] has handled them falsely. Prophets and priests alike all practice deceit. I will take away their harvest, declares the Lord. There will be no grapes on the vine. There will be no figs on the tree, and their leaves will wither. What I have given them will be taken from them.

Earlier in his ministry, Jesus picks up on this "figment" of symbolism when he tells this parable in Luke 13 about the religious leaders.

### **Luke 13.6-7**

"A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

I trust that by this point the meaning of this enacted parable is becoming clearer. If there's any question left all we need to do is to see the context in which Jesus enacts this parable.

As we already saw, this parable is acted out in two parts. New Testament scholars call this kind of split teaching "intercalation." You chemists will recognize that word. It means inserting something between layers.

The first layer of events we've already read about from Mark 11.9-10. That's when Jesus came into Jerusalem and entered into the temple grounds, to the great joy of the people and the great consternation of the religious leaders.

Then Jesus inserts the first part of this parable into these unfolding events in Jerusalem, revealing that the fig tree has borne no fruit and then telling the tree it will never bear fruit again.

Then comes the second layer of events, which we read about in Mark 11.15-17.

Jesus and his disciples walk into the temple grounds and he breaks up the lucrative money mart that directly benefits the spiritual leaders. Then he speaks against them, proclaiming that they have failed in their most basic mission, which is to make God accessible to the people. Their mission is to get people into relationship with God, not get money into their pockets.



After that confrontation Jesus inserts the second half of the parable into the unfolding events, when he leads the disciples back past the fig tree and Peter points out that it has withered from the roots up and died.

And then comes the third layer of events, when Jesus returns to the temple with the disciples and faces off with the religious leaders. Mark tells us about it in Mark 11.27-33.

The religious leaders confront Jesus. "You! Answer us! Tell us by what authority you do these things!"

"No," he says, "you answer me first. Tell me whose authority *you* recognize. Who are *you* obeying when you put obstacles in the way of people seeking God, and when you line your own pockets through your ministry, and when you fail to recognize the day of God's visitation, and when you seek to bring my ministry and my life to an end?"

Matthew 23.13

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces.

Luke 11.46

And you experts of the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.

Seen in context, it's clear that the fig tree represents the religious leaders, and the lack of fruit on the tree represents their complete failure to provide for the spiritual hunger of the people of God, exposing the bankruptcy of their own souls. Jesus telling the tree it will never bear fruit again expresses divine judgment against the very leaders who have been judging and condemning him.

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So where does that leave us?

During Holy Week, Jesus begins his slow walk to his death. Peter, his own follower, tries to prevent him. The priests, the scripture teachers, the Pharisees – the religious leaders who are entrusted with the spiritual leadership of the nation – they try to prevent him too.

But Jesus turns to Peter and tells him he is seeing things from a human point of view, not from God's. Peter cannot conceive of how the death of Jesus and a life of dying to self as his follower could be what God has for him. He sees the death of Jesus as a mistake instead of God's answers to God's great promises and our great need.

And then Jesus turns to the religious leaders and tells them essentially the same thing, that they are seeing things from a human point of view, not from God's. They see the life of Jesus as a threat instead of as God's answer to God's great promises and our great need.

As Jesus makes his long walk from Galilee to Jerusalem, and to the cross and the empty tomb and the throne that await him there, with each step he takes, he comes into contact with men and women and young people who are desperately trying to make sense of him.

Who are you, really? Where is all this going? Why *this* path, of all paths? And when I follow you, what will that mean for me? What will you require of me? Where are you taking me? Where is all this going?

As both Peter and the religious leaders make clear, it is so tempting for us to see Jesus through the lens of our own understanding, rather than seeing him from God's point of view.

When we do, when we insist that he fit into our way of understanding, we will inevitably find ourselves standing in the way of what God wants to do in us and in the world around us rather than cooperating with it.

Part of our welcoming Jesus at the gates of Jerusalem this morning is welcoming him as the King that he is, not the King we want him to be, to welcome him as the One whose word is the last word in all things, whether or not we understand it or agree with it.

- That means resigning from deciding for Jesus what he can and cannot do.
- That means resigning from placing myself over Jesus and subjecting him to my judgment, and placing myself beneath him instead, and letting him subject me to his judgment.
- That means letting him tell me what following him means rather than me telling him.
- That means letting him disrupt the tidy traditions I've carefully put in place in my life and abandoning myself to him instead.
- That means letting him turn my world and my values and my priorities upside down.
- That means me trusting that he really is on the throne, and worthy of my trust, despite the appearance of things.

- That means sliding off the throne and taking off the crown and returning them to their proper owner.
- That means owning up to the fact that I may be living a Christian life that is more of my own devising than it is of his – that there may be whole aspects of the Christian life that I am just getting wrong, because I am carrying them out according to my own understanding rather than seeing them from God's perspective.
- That means resolving each day to center my life anew on him and not on me.
- That means surrendering my life, laying it down before him, and making room for him to do whatever he wants to do in me and through me now and forever.

**Prayer**

Jesus, Hosanna! Save us . . . from ourselves.

Blessed are you, the king who comes in the name of the Lord! We make room for you, surrender our lives to you, laying them down before you.