

**“The Fig Tree’s Lesson”**

**Mark 13:1—14:11** *NRSV*

**Sixth Week of Lent, Palm Sunday, March 24, 2024**

**New London UMC**

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I thought it might help to share a little history with you. You may recall that it was King David who WANTED to build a temple for God; and God told David he couldn’t, but his son could. The First Temple was built in Jerusalem during King Solomon’s reign and was completed in 957 BCE. The Temple’s treasures were pillaged by Nebuchadrezzar II of Babylonia in 604 BCE. It is believed that the building was TOTALLY destroyed in 587/586 BCE; and Jews taken into exile in 586 and 582 BCE. After Cyrus II of Persia conquered Babylonia in 538 BCE he issued an order that the exiled Jews could return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple. That work was completed in 515 BCE.

Centuries later, while Jerusalem was under Syrian-Greek control, in 169 BCE Antiochus IV Epiphanes plundered the Temple. He then desecrated it in 167 BCE by building an altar to Zeus there – on which he commanded that sacrifices be made. This touched off the Hasmonean revolt, which led to Judas Maccabeus cleansing and rededicating the temple. You probably know that during Hanukkah the lighting of the candles in the menorah is a remembrance of how a single cruse of oil used to fill the lamps in the Temple did not run out during the eight-day rededication celebration.

During the Roman conquest of Jerusalem there were a few troubling incursions at the Temple. But under Roman rule it was Herod the Great of Judea who commissioned a major 46 year-long rebuilding of the Second Temple from 20 BCE to 26 CE. The time frame in which Jesus’ disciples are so impressed by what they see. But in 66 CE there was a rebellion against Rome. It was stopped. But to emphasize that it was OVER the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE.

Nine years later there was a huge eruption from Mount Vesuvius that heavily blanketed Pompeii, Heruculaneum, and other smaller communities in falling ash and pumice stones. On the second day a “pyroclastic flow” — a 100-miles-per-hour blast of superheated gas and pulverized rock — poured down the side of the mountain and vaporized everything and everyone in its path. It is estimated that at the time of the eruption there were 12,000 people living in Pompeii, and almost as many people lived in the surrounding region. Up to 16,000 people died in the region, including about 2,000 people within the city of Pompeii. Stories about what happened and the massive destruction caused by the eruption spread rapidly – starting with those who were fortunate enough to be able to flee from it, and others who were close enough to witness the horror without being caught up in it.

Why do I share these bits of history with you? They are just some of the events that the author of Mark, and the first people to hear this gospel, would have known about. Of course we know that there is an even more extensive, world-wide history of wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines, pain and suffering, betrayals and hatred. And that

throughout every period of time people have found themselves in situations of severe crisis, overwhelming disasters, and wondered, “Is this it? Is this the end of the world?” Because in the thick of such things it can certainly seem like it – especially when you see people around you dying, and think that you are also on the verge of death. Or when the Temple’s massive 37-1/2 foot, by 18 foot, by 12 foot blocks of stone are pulled apart and destroyed. Or when whole vibrant cities are entombed in ash, or cratered by rounds of bombing, or leveled by just one bomb. . . . Jesus warned that in days of trouble, desperation, and despair, the false messiahs and false prophets will appear and try to lead good people astray. Jesus said that’s when we need to not give up, to stay alert, for the Son of Man is coming. . . . However, even Jesus couldn’t say EXACTLY WHEN that will come to pass:

*“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.”*

*(Mark 13:32-33 NRSV)*

Well, we’re not good at staying alert indefinitely. We’d like more concrete info to go on. And just when we thought there wouldn’t be another reference to a fig tree – Jesus says:

*“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.”*

*(Mark 13:28-29 NRSV)*

Huh! That still sounds kind of vague. Every generation has thought “these things” were surely taking place around them – but even if the Son of Man has drawn nearer, the time has not yet come. And who among us would have expected a lesson about a fig tree with just leaves on it to be a **positive** thing! Because we know that just having leaves was NOT enough for the fig tree that Jesus cursed when he was looking for something to eat. Do you think that when the day arrives, and the Son of Man shows up, the fig tree will be fruitful – no matter what season it is? Or was the cursed withering of the leafed out fig tree representative of the suffering that will happen BEFORE the Son of Man comes in the clouds with great power and glory? Do you think there could be MULTIPLE lessons we are supposed to learn from the fig trees in the Gospel of Mark? I’m not sure. But Jesus emphasized: “And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” *(Mark 13:37 NRSV)* We need to stay aware and observant. No doubt there will be more things yet to learn.

Perhaps some of us need to learn how to prepare for the death of someone we love and honor – despite the fact that we don’t want them to die, and we would rather deny the fact that they are going to die. That’s the lesson that unfolds at the house of Simon the leper in Bethany. The woman who anoints Jesus with a very expensive ointment of nard demonstrates that while Jesus is still alive, she will do everything she can for him. She will spare no cost. She is fully aware of how little time remains to be with him. And her actions show that she does not want to live with any regret over what she “could have” or

“would have” done. She is committed to being fully present with Jesus as he prepares for death. . . . The importance of this timely expression of love and care is clear and evident to Jesus – but Jesus and the woman seem to be the only ones in the house who understand this valuable lesson.

A very different lesson can be learned from Judas Iscariot. With Judas we can learn that if we offer ourselves up to be used as a pawn in someone else’s power game, we’re going to have a very limited role, and will soon be cast aside. Judas would be paid to make ONE critical move in the game. But once that move is made – he’s done. The game will go on without him. But will Judas be the same? The act of betrayal will become part of who he is. And how do any of us live with the burden of knowing we’ve betrayed someone who is important to us? How much would we think we needed to be paid to betray someone? Would any amount truly be enough to justify or excuse our betrayal?

Judas helps us to think about what decisions we’re willing to make and live with as we wait for the day of the Lord to arrive. As we stay alert and watching for the Son of Man to come in the clouds with great power and glory. And perhaps Judas may inspire to use our time more fruitfully.

Amen.