

“Getting Started”

Mark 11:1-19 *NRSV*

Third Week of Lent, March 3 & 4, 2024

New London UMC

Rev. Joyce Rich

They are pilgrims among thousands of pilgrims headed into Jerusalem for the Passover festival. And like thousands of other pilgrims, they will not stay overnight IN Jerusalem. There simply isn't enough housing in the city for everyone. But they had to join the flow of humanity entering Jerusalem from the East, coming down from the Mount of Olives into the city, and up to the temple mount. They had to officially arrive in the city for Passover. . . . But then they had to walk back to Bethany for the night, returning the borrowed colt along the way.

The next morning on their walk to Jerusalem, Jesus was obviously feeling a bit peckish – but he didn't ask his disciples if they had anything that he could eat. Instead he looked around for something to eat. He saw a fig tree just coming into leaf. It would be a real miracle to find some edible figs still on the tree from the last harvest. But, hey! This is Jesus looking for something to eat! He went over to the tree and found – nothing. And we're thinking, “Yeah, that was a long, long shot. What can you expect?” But we're not expecting Jesus to flat out curse this fig tree so that it will NEVER produce fruit again! It seems a little extreme to curse a tree for not bearing fruit out of season. And it doesn't seem like the kind of thing that Jesus would typically do. . . . But who knows how stressed out Jesus was? How hard was it for Jesus to get up and go to Jerusalem again that morning? We know he expected to be arrested and killed in Jerusalem. Yet nothing had happened the day before when they arrived. Heaven knows there must have been plenty of people in the festival crowd who would have recognized Jesus and his disciples; who had heard Jesus teach; who had seen Jesus heal people. . . . And yet – he had moved freely through the crowd. No one had stopped him then. . . . So would this second day be “the day”? Would Jesus be arrested when he went back to Jerusalem? Was Jesus feeling more on edge with every step he took toward Jerusalem?

It's not long before Jesus' cursing of the fig tree seems mild compared to how he drove out everyone who had set up shop at the temple. Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers, the crates of the dove sellers, and sent all the vendors packing. If anyone even tried to carry ANYTHING through the temple grounds, Jesus stopped them. What a whirling dervish of intensity Jesus must have been as he DID ALL THAT AND TAUGHT at the same time! It is no wonder that the crowd of pilgrims at the temple was spellbound by his teaching! He actually called out the temple authorities for turning the place into a den of robbers, when God's house should be a house of prayer for all the nations! Who does that?! And then Jesus just kept teaching ALL DAY LONG! . . . Well of course the chief priests and the scribes heard him, how could they not? This was the start of their week to shine with all these pilgrims in town for Passover – and Jesus was making them look bad, very bad, in the eyes of all these people. But Jesus' actions had also severely cut into the temple's revenue stream for that day. It was clear that this man

had to be stopped. So they kept looking for a way to kill him – without further alienating themselves from the Passover pilgrims. It was not going to be easy, and they made little to no progress that day. So when evening came around, Jesus and his disciples freely left Jerusalem and went back to Bethany for the night. And AGAIN – no one stopped them. Even the spellbound festival crowd didn't try to hold Jesus back from leaving.

Jesus must have been utterly drained from pushing along that whole day. There's only so much adrenaline to feed on from taking the risks he took. From making the public statements that he made as he was teaching. He had to have been hyper vigilant all day watching for any changes in crowd; ready for the chief priests and the scribes to do something. . . . And hour after hour – they did nothing.

Now I know that the disciples don't always come across as being very empathetic or observant. They've tried to deny or ignore Jesus' three warnings of what will happen to him in Jerusalem. But surely the disciples had to have picked up on Jesus' edginess? He simply was not acting like himself. Cursing a fig tree? What was that about? And if he'd have given them any advance briefing on his plan to shut down commerce at the temple – well, the disciples certainly would have tried to talk him out of doing that! There was no need to openly provoke the temple authorities! There was no need for any of that! People have always been drawn to Jesus, almost instinctively aware of what he can do. He's never needed to deliberately call attention to himself. So why did he have to take over the merchants' and money changers' space at the temple as a platform for teaching the crowd? What in the world was Jesus trying to do? Did he want to get them all killed?

Do you think anyone slept well that night in Bethany? We know that it's hard for us to rest well when things feel dangerously unsettled, or we're deeply concerned about a loved one. We toss and turn, and lose sleep over things that trouble us. We know it does no good to keep going over the same things again and again – but we can't seem to stop ourselves from doing it. And the less sleep we get at night, the crankier we get during the day. Which doesn't really help our decision-making skills and relationship responses, and can compound our troubles.

So how can we find some grace and loving kindness to help us get through the hard days and the hard nights? The practice that Jesus usually followed was to stop what he was doing in order to take some time in a quiet place to be alone and to pray. To step away for a moment to gain a fresh perspective. To offer what has been happening to God in prayer. To let go of whatever needs to be let go of. (And to not try to grab back the worries that we asked God to hold onto for us.) To ask for God's wisdom on what to do next. And to trust that God will be with us. To rest in the assurance of God's steadfast love and care. Unfortunately, Jesus and the disciples seemed too preoccupied to take time for prayer, too busy to find true rest. I guess that's what can happen when God's house is no longer a house of prayer for all the nations. Let that be a lesson for us. Amen.