

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

A YALE BIBLE STUDY

with Allen Hilton

Session Six – Jesus Jolts Jerusalem

11.1—12.44

We've followed Jesus up and down the hills and across the sea of Galilee, healing, teaching, sparring with small-town pastors, and grooming his guys. We got wind of an angry Pharisee or two who would like to have done away with him, and he's had his share of opposition from demons, but, to be fair, he's looked like a Major Leaguer playing against minor league competition.

As we move into these last chapters of the Gospel of Mark, the temperature quickly rises. Crowds continue to flock to Jesus, but the level and stakes of his conflicts raise ratchet up the intensity of the episodes. Out of that cauldron come essential truths. But as we receive them, the specter of the thrice-anticipated crucifixion looms larger and larger.

To feel that intensity and hear that powerful truth, let's walk Jesus' Last Week together.

SUNDAY

Our Palm Sunday passage pictures Jesus entering Jerusalem for the first time. He and his disciples have been a couple days' journey north of Jerusalem, in Galilee and its surrounding regions, through chs 1—10 (except the Jericho scene with Blind Bartimaeus at the end of 10). They've made the arduous trip for the Passover Feast, which Jews had been celebrating together since the time of Moses.

A mere 65 miles may seem a short distance to us, but Jerusalem and Galilee were lifetimes apart. In a few days, bystanders outside Jesus' trial will recognize the frightened Peter as a Galilean (Mark 14.70). How can they tell? Accents and dress must have been quite different. Think hillbillies in Manhattan.

And travel wasn't easy. These people walked (in verse 2 they get a donkey when they arrive). Also, hilly terrain and the "enemy territory" of Samaria discouraged would-be pilgrims from a direct route. Most Jews who made the trip detoured East across the Jordan to dodge the Samaritans, making the journey longer, before they veered southwest to Jerusalem.

Since people will be identifying Jesus, it's important to see that for chapters leading up to this moment, the Gospel writers have told how Jesus reveals to his disciples and some others increasingly more insight into who he is. From Peter's recognition that Jesus is "the Messiah" (Mark 8), to Jesus' refiguring of that with predictions of his death, to the Transfiguration (Mark 9) and two more passion predictions. Jesus has been opening his identity to a close circle. When we join the action, Jesus and the disciples have just come from Jericho, where Jesus has predicted for the third time that he will die in Jerusalem.

Stakes

There, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, Jesus pauses to stage a show.

This is odd for him. In all ways Jesus has been the opposite of showy. He's taught his followers not to make a show of their religion (Matthew 6.1-18), and chastised hypocrites for making a show of theirs (Mark 7.6-7). His ministry has been one spontaneous, under-the-radar act of generosity after another. In fact, several times in Mark he has shushed people who want to make him famous (e.g., Mark 1.44; 3.12; 8.30).

Here, though, Jesus instructs his disciples: "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it." Jesus is not merely procuring transportation. He could walk to town in less time. Jesus is staging a show.

Why? Matthew says it is to fulfill prophecy. In fact, that Gospel writer will awkwardly alter Mark's version and have Jesus ride two beasts at once because he hears the prophet require that (Matthew 21.1-7). But for Mark (and Luke) there's no prophecy. Jesus just arranges a donkey and rides into the city.

Again, why? The answer may appear in the response of the crowd. They throw palm branches down in front of him and shout, "Hosanna!" Hosanna is a garden-variety expression of praise that appears only here in all of scripture. This is not newsworthy. Their next words are also unexceptional: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

It's the words after those that will put Jesus on everybody's radar screen. Chief Priests will discover it, and Roman intelligence men will take notice. There, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, where David reigned in Israel's heyday, where centuries of Jews had expected a Messiah to return and overthrow the prevailing power, a crowd of worshippers raises its voice and shouts, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David."

Some of this crowd will have experienced Jesus from the beginnings in Galilee, hearing his quite different-than-David picture of God's Kingdom. Others will have joined the throng late and only have this one moment as their snapshot of who Jesus is. Imagine yourself in those very different shoes as you listen to the story this time.

The ambiguity of Jesus' symbolic message must have made for a crowd of people who defined Kingdom in different ways. Interpretations of that dynamic abound. One is the Broadway hit musical, "Jesus Christ Superstar," which features the uneasiness of the Jerusalem authorities, the zeal of the Jewish revolutionaries, the peacefulness of the people who have followed Jesus through the Beatitudes and the healings, and the strangeness of it all for Jesus. This scene from that musical captures the variety.

Notice that Jesus has ceased the shushing. You and I have puzzled for ten chapters at that tendency. From the exorcism in a Capernaum synagogue in chapter one all the way through 'til the walk down from Transfiguration in chapter nine, Jesus has commanded people not to reveal his identity. Now, he lets a throng of people broadcast strong claims about him that will ruffle Roman and Jewish feathers.

Why? What is it about the shift to Jerusalem that makes Jesus ready to be known? Right there on the outskirts of Jerusalem, the simple Galilean has staged a King's triumph without stopping in the moment to define what he means by "King." Now everyone is watching. What will Jesus do with their attention? We shall soon see!

A Poet's Angle

Familiar stories can become fixed in our minds, and we can inadvertently file them away under the label "UNDERSTOOD". To break through that hard shell, it helps to hear the story from a surprising perspective. Mary Oliver's poem does just that, telling the story through a reflection on the donkey's experience of it.

On the outskirts of Jerusalem
the donkey waited.
Not especially brave, or filled with understanding,
he stood and waited.

*How horses, turned out into the meadow,
leap with delight!
How doves, released from their cages,
clatter away, splashed with sunlight.*

But the donkey, tied to a tree as usual, waited.
Then he let himself be led away.
Then he let the stranger mount.

Never had he seen such crowds!
And I wonder if he at all imagined what was to happen.
Still, he was what he had always been: small, dark, obedient.

I hope, finally, he felt brave.
I hope, finally, he loved the man who rode so lightly upon him,
as he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped, as he had to, forward.

Does the focus on the beast widen your perspective on the event?

MONDAY

Oh, oh, oh tell me why
I don't like Mondays
Tell me why
I don't like Mondays
Tell me why
I don't like Mondays
I want to shoot
The whole day down

From the sublime poetry of Mary Oliver to...the Boomtown Rats' "I Don't Like Mondays." Jesus' last Monday on earth changed the tone and direction of the Gospels. If he piqued curiosity on Sunday, Monday he issued a direct challenge. Like the Boomtown Rats and most middle and high school students, Jesus starts the day in a bit of a mood: he curses a fig tree. The poor fig tree was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Jesus had a lot on his mind – literally the weight of the world on his shoulders. Think about it: would you read this story to your kids or grandkids as a moral example? What's the use of it?

"Prophet" was the overwhelming winner of the opinion poll Jesus commissioned his disciples to report in Mark 8. "Who do people say that I am?" he asked, and they said, "Elijah, one of the prophets, John the Baptist back from the dead." Here we get another glimpse at why they might have thought so. Israel's prophets made judgments using the voice of God, and they did weird things to symbolize the message of God. The fig tree episode seems prophetic in this way – if only to the disciples along the Way.

A Big Audience.

The Temple was the center of Israel's worship life in Jesus' time. For all but the Jerusalemites, week-to-week piety took place in synagogues where they lived. But at festival times, they streamed to Jerusalem and the Temple – Jews from all around the "world" – especially during the high holy days. In Acts 2, during the lesser feast of Pentecost, Luke describes the crowd

outside the Temple: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs (Acts 2.9-11).

Passover was the highest and holiest of feasts. The crowd would be even larger than the one at Pentecost. Jesus has chosen Super Bowl Sunday for his demonstration.

The Importance of the Temple.

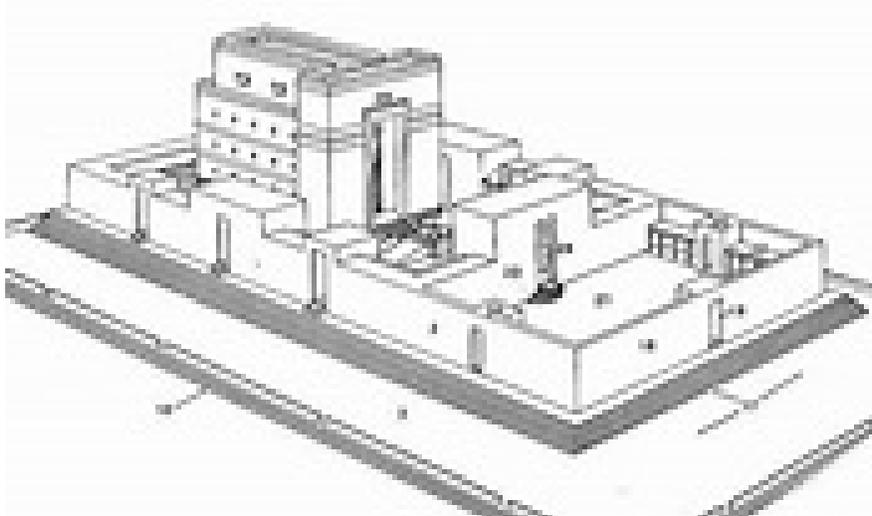
To know the danger Jesus risks by “attacking” the Temple, we need to know the intense passion of his people for their Temple. In Psalm 137, where the exiled Jew seethes beside a Babylonian river while he remembers the destruction of Solomon’s Temple: “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” Remembering the songs he’d sung in the Jerusalem Temple, remembering how dear the Temple had been, he wants God to avenge those who destroyed it: “O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” Is it any wonder that the Jewish leaders would take offense when Jesus tells them they’re doing this all wrong?

The History of the Temple

The center of the Temple was the real presence of God, symbolized and celebrated in the Ark of the Covenant (which Steven Spielberg and Harrison Ford made famous again in the 80s). Only the highest priests could enter that inner sanctum. The altars of sacrifice lay in courts outside that center. The court Jesus entered is likely the

Fast Facts:

- In 975 B.C.E., Solomon built the first Temple in Jerusalem.
- In 587 B.C.E., Babylonian armies destroyed Solomon’s Temple.
- In 516 B.C.E., Nehemiah led the project (commissioned by Cyrus of Persia) to rebuild the Temple. We call this one the Second Temple
- Over the next 500 years, the Jews occasionally renovated or added, with the largest improvement coming under Herod in 19-4 BCE, when he more than doubled its size.
- In 70 C.E. – 40 years after Jesus walks in and cleanses it – Roman armies will destroy the Second Temple.



What Happened That Monday

When Jesus walks into the Temple that first-century Monday morning, it has already been the sacred center of Israel's religion for nearly a millennium. That's how long it's been since priests first placed the Ark of the Covenant in the center of King Solomon's new building.

There have been threats. Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar probably thought he extinguished Israel's religion when he burned it to the ground six hundred years back, but that was a mere eighty-year interruption. A crew led by Ezra and then Nehemiah rebuilt Temple and city walls, and the worship of Israel resumed. A Greek tyrant called Antiochus Epiphanes profaned it with the paraphernalia of Greek gods two hundred years back, and the Romans occasionally show off their power there. But still the Temple stands, with a strong update by Herod, as Jesus and the disciples walk into Jerusalem.

And it is an awesome sight – at least for country boys from Galilee. They are seeing the building at its most magnificent, after forty years of Herod's ambitious building project. The wide-eyed disciples will soon say, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" (13.1) Imagine stepping into New York City or London for the first time, pre-television.

Judgment

Jesus walks into Israel's very holiest site and calls it unholy. He mourns the wide gap between God's intention and the merchandise show he sees in front of him. We can imagine it: Merchants holler out prices for their sacrificial animals, a commodity over which they exercise a monopoly. Money-changers exact whatever fee they wish for their services. But Jesus will have no barriers between the worshippers and their God.

All of this leads Jesus once again to do what prophets do for a living: Jesus acts out the truth. He drives out all the merchants and throws over the stands of the money-changers. He effectively blocks the whole economic operation of the Temple. And then, to explain his actions, he shouts out the words of the prophet Isaiah: "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." It's no wonder that when the priests finally manage to arrest Jesus three days later, their first charge against him will be about the Temple.

Some stood up and gave false testimony against Jesus, saying, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" (14.57-58)

At a comfortable reader's remove, it is too easy for us to raise our own righteous shout, "Go get 'em Jesus! Give 'em hell, Lord!" Too easy to put Darth Vader clothes on the priests and see Jesus as Luke or Rae. It's easy to see the stark line of good and evil from the cheap seats, but...

Humility dictates access to a mirror. After all, those Jerusalemites of old were a lot like us. They thought they were doing God's work as it should be done. It took Jesus' eyes to see what was askew. The same goes for our individual lives. Slave-owners and the leaders of the Spanish Inquisition even thought they were doing God's will. It took prophetic reformers to spot the evil.

You and I love our church. And we probably feel pretty good about our lives. We're proud of the good things we're doing – especially during Covid improvisation! – and we should, mostly. But this Holy Monday scene offers a good chance to ask, "What would Jesus throw down if he walked into my church? Or even into my life?"

Back to the sublime. George Herbert's poem "The Altar" has helped 4 centuries of Christians move from the text to our lives.

A broken ALTAR, Lord thy servant rears,
Made of a heart, and cemented with tears:
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workman's tool hath touch'd the same.
A HEART alone
Is such a stone,
As nothing but
Thy pow'r doth cut.
Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame,
To praise thy Name:
That if I chance to hold my peace,

These stones to praise thee may not cease.
O let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,
And sanctifie this ALTAR to be thine.

Herbert reminds us that we are never merely audience to Mark's story of Jesus. Like that first crowd of Christians in Rome (or somewhere else), we gather around this Gospel to help us move faithfully toward this moment and the minutes, hours, days, and years of our lives that lie ahead.

TUESDAY

Battle Royale

Jesus' time between Temple Monday and Maundy Thursday featured one charged encounter after another. Palm Sunday covered eleven verses in Mark, and Temple Monday required a mere seven verses. But this Tuesday of Holy Week spans a chapter-and-a-half of our Gospel, during which Jesus teaches, challenges the leaders, and prepares his disciples for what is to come. It all adds up to more red ink than we're used to seeing in Mark.

Somehow, though, Jesus uses this charged atmosphere, not merely to defend himself, but to teach, and the Jerusalem Jesus is an edgy teacher: strongly dialectic, more Socratic than he usually is. He engages brief conversations, mostly started by people who don't like him very much. In rapid succession (Mark 11.20—12.34)

- On the way into the Temple, the disciples notice that the fig tree Jesus cursed yesterday has withered. He uses that moment to encourage believing prayer that can move mountains and forgiving hearts that can melt ice. (11.20-25)
- Immediately as he enters the Temple area, "the chief priests, scribes, and elders" are ready for him (still stinging from Monday's throw-down?). They confront Jesus and ask for his credentials. (11.27-33)
- Jesus tells a parable about vineyard workers who defy the owner and harm his messengers. It is a thinly-veiled accusation that generations of Israel's leaders have jealously guarded their turf by harming and killing God's messengers. (12.1-12)
- Next comes a string of challenges from inside the cadre of leaders:
 - First, Pharisees and Herodians confront Jesus about the hot issue of the day: whether Jews should pay taxes to Rome. (12.13-17)
 - Next, Sadducees (who do not believe in resurrection or afterlife) challenge Jesus with a far-fetched puzzle from Deuteronomy's levirate marriage laws about how the afterlife will go. (12.18-27)
 - Finally, an expert in the Law of Moses from the Pharisee camp challenges Jesus to name the greatest commandment of all. This was a commonly-debated question among the rabbis, and Jesus gives his own very famous answer from

Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19. (12.28-33)

Consider all the advertisements or online articles you've seen or heard in the last month. Then ask, what is the most important product or opinion? How would you choose? How can we sort information overload? The people in Jerusalem on that Tuesday may have felt that way about God's commands. Their Torah includes 613 commands. How would they know which is most important? Tough question! The rabbis debated it extensively. When it came time to trap the upstart Galilean preacher, that's one of the questions they asked. Here's that exchange:

Mark's picture of the Jewish leaders is comical. In each case, the interlocutors they send are appropriately experts in the subject matter of their question – each group asks Jesus about something that group would have cared a lot about. (E.g., Herodians cared about tax, and Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, we know, not only from scripture, but from the first-century Jewish historian, Josephus.) But these leaders seem to huddle up each time, send the right team in to give it their best shot, and then leave flummoxed. Throughout the exchanges, Jesus seems like the little kid who outsmarts the bullies at school. Each time he comes out on top.

Another comical element comes out in the conversation with the Sadducees. They offer a convoluted hypothetical in which a woman marries a man, who dies and is replaced as her husband by a brother, who dies, and then the next brother, who also dies, and... You get the picture! Their question? "Whose wife will she be in heaven?" They think they've got him. "How can there be a heaven if you can't solve questions like that?" In his reply, Jesus plays the pedantic schoolmaster with a slow pupil, harkening to one of the most famous scenes in scripture, where God calls Moses to go to Pharaoh: "Do you remember in the Book of Moses – you know, the story about the bush...?!" It would be like a student asking a Harvard professor, "You remember the ABC's, don't you?"

What keeps these exchanges from being too comical, though, is the continued danger to Jesus. He wins each fencing match, but each win only makes his situation in Jerusalem more precarious.

Another observation: Jesus is willing to debate matters of truth here. He doesn't say to the Sadducees, "Let's agree to disagree, shall we?" He saddles up and debates them with scripture, because there either is or isn't a resurrection of the dead. How does this approach play in our era, which somehow manages to alternate between extreme dogmatism (my way or the highway!) and post-truth relativism?

Always the Teacher

Mark ends the episode economically. "After that no one dared to ask him any question." But notice what happens when the shooting stops. The rat-a-tat-tat of the Jewish leaders' fire has subsided. Now, some of us might see a charged showdown with the most powerful religious leaders in the land whom you insulted the day before by attacking their operation – that seems a good day's work. For an analogy, picture Luther's fatigue after a day being grilled by the

ecclesiastical courts of the Roman church on heresy charges.

Jesus is a teacher, though, so he's just getting started. After the noble authorities slink away, he starts talking to anyone in the Temple who will listen. "Hey, you, how can the scribes say that the Messiah is the Son of David?"

A couple things to help us place this question. As echoes, remember here both

- the words of Blind Bartimaeus – "Son of David, son of David, have mercy on me!" and
- the words of the adoring crowds on Sunday – "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!"). Also
- the absence of a nativity or genealogy in Mark, which leaves no link to the Davidic line, and,
- the way Jesus distances himself from his earthly family and redefines his kinfolk as a community of people who do God's will. (3.31-35)

In Mark, the only people who have linked him to David are the common people who guess at his identity. To refute the claim of Messiah's subordination to David, Jesus produces Psalm 110 and challenges the logic. The episode leads to a general critique of the scribes (the ones who were wrong about Messiah and David) for the way they rob blind even the poorest of widows. And he's not even done yet. Still seething about the scribes' inhumanity, he commends one of those very widows, whose gift is greater than the pocket change of the very wealthy.

Whew! Have truth, will travel. Jesus the teacher will take every opportunity available to him. Next session, we'll see that his Tuesday Teach still holds one more session: that mysterious specter of Apocalypse.

Close

By Tuesday night, our shushing Jesus has let the throngs shout out his glory, tangled with the Temple Team, and won a cage match with the religious powers that rule in Jerusalem. Jesus' Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday set an ambivalent tone: for all his Palm Sunday glory, prophetic Monday, and teaching Tuesday, just as light breaks out from the liberating truth of his deeds and words, the shadow of the cross grows darker.

For Next Time

02NOV20 The Passion (Mark 14.1—15.47)

One influential NT scholar characterized the Gospel of Mark as "a passion narrative (the story of Jesus' death) with an extended introduction." You and I have seen that it is much more than that, but the cross is crucial for Mark's understanding of Jesus' identity and message. In this session, we will follow Jesus from the Last Supper to the Garden of Gethsemane to the High Priest's palace to the office of the Roman governor and on to the crucifixion. At each stop we'll ask how the Jesus of the passion continues to be the one we've known since he showed up in Galilee.

Preparation:

- Read the familiar story of Jesus' last supper with his disciples, but this time notice the mysterious secrecy of his arrangements of the room (as with the same sort of arrangements for the donkey of Palm Sunday). Does Jesus know people in Jerusalem?
- Put yourself in the disciples' place. What does Jesus seem to be telling you? And how well have you done at understanding his meaning earlier in the Gospel?
- Put yourself in Jesus' place. Knowing what lies ahead and the role his disciples would play in it, would you have eaten with them if you were he?
- What do you think motivated Judas' betrayal? (14.10-11, 43-45) How could we even begin to guess? What do you think motivated Peter's denials? (14.66-72)
- What is the main issue of Jesus' trial before the High Priest's Council? And what is the main issue in the trial before Pilate?
- How would you characterize Jesus on the cross if you only had Mark telling you about it?
- What do you think it means when the Roman soldier looks at a dead man and says he is God's son?