

Sermon for Sunday, March 3, 2024

Mark 12:1-12 [13-17]

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

As we think about today's Scripture reading it seems most important that we keep our eyes on Jesus and keep our hearts and minds on what he teaches.

Today's Scripture reading is a lesson full of teachings by Jesus. But it is set in a particular place and time and in order to make sense of this passage it is helpful to review the context: the place and the time where this scene occurs.

In a couple of weeks we will read the story of Palm Sunday and Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem from chapter 11. At the end of that triumphant entry the gospel of Mark tells us, "Then [Jesus] entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve." Jesus *left* Jerusalem. But he came back the next day (Monday) and went to the temple. As Mark tells it, this is when Jesus overturns the tables of the moneychangers and those who were selling animals for sacrifice.

While Jesus' teachings out in the countryside had caused concern he could mostly be ignored. That's because his work was happening out in the country and not in the capital. It wasn't a direct challenge to the religious practices occurring in Jerusalem. But now he has entered the capital city, the seat of both religious and political power. First riding into Jerusalem and being hailed as the messiah, now going to the Temple and causing a commotion. Jesus is knowingly causing trouble and, as you can imagine, the religious authorities are getting nervous. On Monday evening once again, Jesus and his disciples leave Jerusalem.

He returns on Tuesday and goes again to the temple. The religious authorities confront him in part because they are frightened. They saw his audacious actions the day before and recognize that Jesus is not afraid. He's going to confront and take actions that are threatening to the status quo. Today's Scripture reading occurs on this Tuesday. It probably occurs in the Temple. And it occurs just after the religious authorities challenge him asking, "By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you the authority to do them?" Jesus comes back with an answer that puts the

authorities in a very difficult position because of the power of the crowd.

Why does the crowd have so much power? Because it is the week just before Passover. Every Jew that is able is obliged to come to Jerusalem and present an offering at the Temple. The city is packed with people, many of whom are from the countryside and have probably heard Jesus speak. Another sign of the intensity of the situation is the presence of King Herod. King Herod doesn't usually live in Jerusalem but he's come to stay in the city so that if there is a riot or things get out of hand he can take direct control of the Roman army garrison that has been stationed there. Some would say that this atmosphere is a powder keg just waiting for one incident to act as a match. The religious authorities know all of this. It is reasonable to assume that Jesus knows it too.

The religious authorities know that if they do anything to harm Jesus "in the daylight" and in public where the crowds can act as witness they are likely going to cause a riot. That's the last thing they need. When do they arrest Jesus? At night and in the dark.

But to go back to the text that ??? read for us this morning. Jesus has been confronted by the religious authorities who are trying to trap him and come up with an excuse to arrest him. Jesus responds to their challenges with a familiar parable from Isaiah 5, a parable that the religious elites would have been deeply aware of. Isaiah 5 talks about a vineyard that is carefully tended by the landowner. Despite receiving every type of care appropriate the vines yield wild grapes that do not reflect the care they have received. As a result the landowner tears down the protections provided and abandons the vineyard. All Jews, but especially the religious scholars, understood that the vineyard was a word picture for the people Israel.

Jesus takes this parable and adds tenants who were charged with caring for the vineyard. Basically what he is saying is that the people Israel continue to exist but that the landowner (God) has charged certain persons to be caretakers of the vineyard. In Jesus' version those tenants have forgotten that they owe allegiance to the landowner (God) above all else. The behavior described in Jesus' parable indicates that they want to take control over the property and claim it as their own. They have no business doing so because ultimately this vineyard belongs to God.

Thus far, I have provided you with much historical background and theological commentary on today's Scripture passage. These

details and understandings are important. But if we are to remain true to my opening premise, the question then becomes how do we followers of Jesus keep our eyes on him? How does this passage inform our lives in the here and now?

- We need to recognize that in our own way we are tenants of God's vineyard. Each of us have been given something or some things by God and we have a responsibility to care for them. Those somethings might be farmland. Might be children. Might be a home. All of us have a calling to be a steward and caretaker to a portion of God's world.
- Recognizing that we have been given possessions by God's grace, we need to give thanks to God for the gifts that have been given. Out of that thankfulness and since we have been beneficiaries of God's grace we are challenged to be those caretakers.
- As we keep our eyes on Jesus we need to follow him even when it gets frightening. We need to be brave birds even when we are flying through fog; even when we cannot see clearly where we are going or how we are going to "get out of this mess." Certainly the disciples didn't know what was going to happen to Jesus or to them as they traveled back and forth between Jerusalem and Bethany. But they followed anyway. That's what we are called to do. To follow Jesus anyway.
- The disciples didn't have the benefit of knowing the end of the story. We do. We know that Jesus was raised from the dead. We believe that because he was resurrected that the same will be true for us. Death does not win. Death does not have the victory. Life after death through the power of God does.

The apostle Paul wrote about it this way in 1 Corinthians 15:53-58

For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

How then do we keep our eyes on Jesus? Our charge is the final words from this passage:

- Be steadfast and immovable
- Always excel in the work of the Lord
- Remember that in the Lord, your labor is not in vain.
- And, I would add, keep your eyes on Jesus.