

“Songs of Loudest Praise”
Mark 11:1–24
Sunday, March 24, 2024 (Palm Sunday)

Let us pray: Lord, we join our voices with that ancient crowd, crying out, “Hosanna! Save us!”
So speak to us a word that saves, and still our hearts and minds long enough to hear it, in Christ.
Amen.

A week ago, we went to a concert by a musician named Andrew Peterson. He’s doing a tour right now where he plays songs that tell the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. And at one point, he was talking in between songs, telling a story about a time when someone asked him why he is a Christian. And he said to them, “Because I’ve seen too much.” He talked about how he had seen too many signs of Christ’s presence and power and love to be able to deny it. And so he wrote a song about that conversation called, “I’ve Seen Too Much,” and it is sung from the perspective of one of Jesus’ disciples. He sings, “I’ve seen so much that cannot be explained / And I realize it’s a mystery of faith / But my friend was dead and He walked out of the grave / And I knew the world would never be the same / I saw too much, when I looked into the eye / Of the One I love and the One who loves me / And there was nowhere left to hide / I’ve seen too much, too much to deny / Too many points of light, too much to say goodbye.”

And I found myself during that song thinking about Peter. Because we have been in this sermon series focused on Peter for the past month, and think about all of the things that *Peter* has seen in his three years with Jesus: Jesus walking on water, calming a storm, feeding 5,000 people with only a few loaves of bread and some fish; Jesus transfigured, his face shining like the sun, radiating the very glory of God, with Moses and Elijah (who had been dead for centuries) standing next to him; Jesus raising people from the dead – his friend Lazarus and then a widow’s

son. He has seen Jesus healing people who were blind and deaf and had leprosy; people who were possessed by unclean spirits.

Think about all the things that Peter has seen just in our reading today: Jesus arriving in Jerusalem, being hailed as the King of the Jews, with a crowd waving palms and shouting, “Hosanna!” But even *before* that, Jesus tells them to go into the village and they will find a colt tied up there that has never been ridden, and if anyone asks them what they are doing when they take it, to tell them that the Lord needs it, and then *all of that happens*. Peter sees Jesus cleansing the temple, overturning the tables of the moneychangers and driving out those who were buying and selling there. And then perhaps the strangest of all the things Peter sees today is Jesus and the fig tree.

As they are walking along, Jesus is hungry, and he sees a fig tree in the distance. But when he gets to the tree, he sees that there are no figs on it, because it isn't the *season* for figs. And Jesus says to the fig tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” The next day, they walk by the fig tree again, and it is withered down to its roots. The whole tree has just *died*. Peter sees this and says, ‘Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.’ And Jesus says to him, “Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”

What are we supposed to make of this story? Jesus curses a fig tree because it doesn't have any figs *because it wasn't the season for figs*, and then when the fig tree dies, Jesus uses it as an opportunity to talk about prayer. What does *any* of this have to do with Palm Sunday? We are

entering the last days of Jesus' life – *time is of the essence* – and he uses some of his last remaining time to do *this*?

It's important to note how this story is told. We get Jesus riding into Jerusalem being hailed as the King of Israel, then the first part of the fig tree story, then Jesus cleansing the temple, and then the second part of the fig tree story. Jesus cleansing the temple is woven into this story of the fig tree, *almost as if the two things were related*. Why did Jesus curse the fig tree? Because it wasn't producing the fruit that it was created to. Why did Jesus cleanse the temple? Because it wasn't producing the fruit that it was created to. When Jesus drives the moneychangers and vendors out of the temple, he says, "My house shall be a house of prayer for all the nations, but you have made it a den of robbers!"

Moneychangers would take the currency of wherever you're coming from and exchange it for currency that could be used to pay the temple tax...*for a slight upcharge*. This wasn't just a service that they were providing for free; they were making money. People *had* to pay the temple tax, and they *had* to use this money to do it, so what choice did they have? The vendors were selling animals like doves that people could buy to make sacrifices if they couldn't bring an animal of their own. And again, this wasn't just a service that they were providing out of the kindness of their hearts. They were making money. In all of this, the moneychangers and the vendors were taking advantage of the poor. Hebrew scripture talks over and over again about looking out for the poor and helping the poor and not exploiting the poor. And now the religious leaders in the temple are doing the very thing that they are (supposed to be) preaching *against*.

And so one theologian says that just as Jesus wants to find fruit on the fig tree, he wants to find the fruit of *faith* at the temple, but the temple is no different from the withering fig tree. It's

worth noting that this is not the first time that a withering fig tree has appeared in scripture. The same image is used by the prophets Joel, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah to forecast the decline of Israel due to their practicing injustice and not caring for the poor. They compare Israel to a fig tree that will be withered down to its roots. And so one line of thinking is that Jesus is foretelling the destruction of the temple because the religious leaders have lost their way. It's *also* worth noting that when Jesus says, "If you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' ...it will be done for you." The *temple* sits on a *mount*. So there is some thinking that Jesus is talking about the whole temple – mountain and all – being uprooted and thrown into the sea because of their injustice and lack of care for the poor. Just a little while after this in Mark's gospel, Jesus says, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

So there is a sense in which the withering of the fig tree represents what the religious leaders are doing to their whole faith. "You are not bearing good fruit, and so God will destroy you." That's pretty harsh. But it leads us to *another* way to understand this story. Because one of the things Jesus shows here is that he has the *power* to destroy. With his mere words, he curses a fig tree, and it *dies* within a day. The disciples have seen that Jesus has the power to *heal*, to *give* life, and now they see that he has the power to *destroy* and *take life*.

At any point in this week that follows, as Jesus is arrested and beaten and crucified, he could have used that power to destroy the religious leaders and Roman authorities who are doing this to him and stop the whole thing. Like he says in the garden when he is arrested, "Do you think that I cannot appeal to God, and God would at once send more than twelve legions of angels to defend me." He could make them *all* suffer the same fate as the fig tree. But he *doesn't*. Jesus *has* the power to destroy those who want to kill him, but he *chooses* not to use it. He chooses not

to match violence with violence and death with death. And then he tells his followers to do the same.

Earlier in Mark's gospel, Jesus gave his disciples the power to do what he does – heal the sick, cast out demons. And now he says that, through their prayer and faith in God, they have the ability to destroy even the temple; they could command the very mountain on which the temple stands to be thrown into the sea, and it *would*. If we kept reading after Jesus says, “Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it shall be yours,” in the very next verse, he says, “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive your trespasses.” Jesus affirms that, like him, his disciples have the power to destroy and seek vengeance. He *also* affirms that, like him, they have the power to make a different choice. Jesus gives his followers, not a call to arms, but a commandment to forgive. A story that *starts* with the destruction of the fig tree *ends* with prayer and forgiveness.

When Jesus finds no fruit on the fig tree, he destroys it. When he finds no fruit in the temple – or in *us* – he *forgives* it. He doesn't *take* life; he *gives his own*.

But still, we are left with this pesky verse, “If you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you...whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” And the example that we always hear there is, “Oh, so if I pray for a million dollars, then God will give it to me?” And I hope we all have a sense that God doesn't work that way. If God gave us all the desires of our hearts, we might not actually be all that happy.

When we were at that concert last week, one of my best friends started texting me, telling me how his family was falling apart. His sixth-grade daughter has such bad depression and anxiety as a result of bullying that she is suicidal. His marriage is suffering as a result. And he said to me, “I have spent so much time and energy and money and *prayer* on this, but nothing has changed, in fact it’s gotten *worse*, and I don’t know if I even believe anymore.”

Jesus says that if you have faith in God and do not doubt in your heart but believe that what you say will come to pass, then whatever you ask for in prayer will be yours. So does my friend just not have enough faith? I’ve known him for 27 years, and he’s one of the most faithful people I have ever met in my life. *He* is one of the main reasons that I was able to take a step in faith and become a pastor. Do *I* not have enough faith? Because I have been praying every Sunday – every *day* – for quite a while now for the violence in Ukraine and Israel to end, and *surely* that is something that God wants, not just *my* will. I have prayed for people to be healed of cancer; some got better, and some didn’t. *We* have prayed for years here in worship that God would heal a specific person of their addiction, and they just relapsed again the other week. What do we do with Jesus’ words here and the reality that some of the good and sincere things that we pray for *do not happen*?

Unfortunately, I can’t answer that question for you. But as I was sitting in that concert, texting with my friend, and listening to a man sing about how he has faith because he has seen too much to think otherwise, the best answer that I can give you is that faith is not about “seeing too much.” It is about *trusting* where we *cannot* see that God is *good* and God is *with us*. Even when we have no proof. Even when everything we *can* see seems to suggest otherwise. Sometimes the loudest song of praise that we can sing is simply, “Hosanna...save us,” trusting in

the one who *made* the mountains and the fig trees and who said, “Tear this temple down, and I will raise it up in three days.”

That is what this week is all about; trusting that God is at work bringing about forgiveness in the midst of sin, life in the midst of death, good in the midst of evil. That through his death on a cross, Jesus Christ has conquered sin, and through his resurrection, Jesus has conquered death. Through *all* of that, he has conquered the powers of evil. There is *still* sin and death and evil; we can look all around us and see proof of *that*. But those things no longer hold any real, lasting power over us. Sin and death and evil could not stop *Jesus* from living, and it cannot stop *us* from living either.

And we can *trust* that, not because we have *seen* too much (quite the contrary). We trust it because we trust the One who says, “In me you may have peace. In the world you face troubles, but take heart – I have *conquered* the world!” Today we celebrate that the King of kings and Lord of lords has taken his rightful place on the throne of this world and of our lives. He rules and reigns over heaven and earth, and of his kingdom there shall be no end. So even when we cannot do it with our *voices*, let us *live* in ways that sing songs of loudest praise, trusting where we cannot see that God is *good* and God is *with us*, in Christ. Amen.