

# Jerusalem!



A look at the Gospel of Mark's description of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem with special attention to related passages from the book of Jeremiah

SESSION 1: *Mark 10:41–52*

## *Was blind but now I see*

### *Comment 1*

The second half of the Gospel of Mark includes a series of stories having to do with the theme, “The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.”

Mark shows us Jesus embracing little children. We find Jesus defending oppressed wives, affirming social outcasts, and looking out for the poor. It's Jesus' way of demonstrating through his own actions the truth that those who are “last” in the world's sight are “first” in God's—and those who are “first” in God's sight must be “first” in the sight of God's people as well.

### *Comment 2*

After this series of stories and teachings, the Gospel of Mark portrays Jesus turning toward Jerusalem, the traditional center of political and religious authority for the Jewish people.

As he turns toward Jerusalem, Jesus tells his disciples that he will be “condemned to death” and “delivered to the Gentiles” (or the Romans) who will kill him. But then, on the third day, he says, he will rise again.

### *Comment 3*

Almost immediately thereafter, James and John—two of Jesus' close disciples—take Jesus aside. They tell Jesus that they have a special re-

quest. Jesus asks what they want him to do for them, and they say that they want to be promised the seats on his right and on his left when he comes into his “glory.”

In other words, they haven't heard his message. They assume that he is heading to Jerusalem to take over as an earthly king—with all of the “glory” that will involve, and they want to assure for themselves a place of honor and power in Jesus' kingdom.

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 10:41

### *For Discussion*

Why might the other disciples have been so upset when they heard the request of James and John?

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 22:1, 3, 5

### *Comment 4*

The book of Jeremiah played a pivotal role in the development of Jewish thought, including its understanding of what a king or ruler should be like.

In these verses, the prophet of the Lord is portrayed as going to the king of Judah, declaring

that in the eyes of God, the role of a ruler is to uphold justice and righteousness—especially for those who are “last” in the eyes of the world.

### *Comment 5*

The ruler who reflects God’s ways is one who delivers those who are oppressed. The ruler who reflects God’s ways is one who allows no harm or hindrance to be placed in the path of those immigrants or foreigners who might otherwise be seen as “strangers.” The ruler who reflects God’s ways is one who brings abundantly good things to fatherless orphans and destitute widows, forever insuring that no innocent blood is shed.

On behalf of God, the prophet declares to the king in Jerusalem that if he will not rule in this way, then the house and line of David “shall become a desolation.” It shall never again rule. It shall never again be given a place of honor and glory.

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 22:13, 30, 29

### *Comment 6*

The prophet says that woe and sadness are the fate of those who build their house through unrighteous behavior—doing that which is “wrong” in the sight of God, exploiting the labor of others, forgetting that those who are “last” in the eyes of the world are always “first” in the sight of God.

Too many who have sat on the throne of David, says the prophet, have behaved in “unrighteous” ways. As a result, never again shall the line of David rule. Never again shall any such king sit on a throne in Judah. “O earth, earth, earth,” pleads the prophet, “hear the word of the Lord.”

### *For Discussion*

What are the implications of all this for those of us who live in our place, in our time?

### *Comment 7*

In the Gospel of Mark, because of the request that James and John make, Jesus knows that his

disciples are not ready for the life that he is asking them to lead. Nor have they understood the message of Jeremiah.

So Jesus responds by telling them that the places of honor in God’s kingdom go only to those for whom such places are “prepared.”

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 23:4–6

### *Comment 8*

In the twenty-third chapter of Jeremiah, the prophet has declared that a day is coming in which “shepherds” will watch over the world—shepherds who will “feed” those who need feeding, shepherds who will cause the weak and the oppressed to “fear no more.” The poor and the hungry shall be dismayed no more, “neither shall they be lacking,” for these shepherds who pursue peace and justice shall so fully embody the ways of God—and the values of God—that they will not be “kings” in the usual sense. Instead, their “name” will be “The Lord is our righteousness.”

Seek that kind of “honor,” Jesus seems to tell James and John—the honor of those who are rich in compassion, the honor of those who overflow with love, the honor of those who bring forth a gracious justice that reflects God’s own heart.

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 10:41–42

### *Comment 8*

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus now points to the “Gentiles” (or Romans) to demonstrate the destructive mentality that he sees creeping into the hearts of his own disciples. It’s a violent mentality, a mentality contrary to deep teachings found in the book of Jeremiah.

It’s a mentality that equates greatness with power. It’s a mentality that says that the people who are “on top” should boss around the people who are “on the bottom.” It’s a mentality that believes that one’s worth is directly related to how “tough” you are on others. If there are lots of peo-

ple that you can “lord it over,” then you must be really special.

### *Comment 9*

The mentality that Jesus saw around him was evil to its core, just as the kings of Judah had been in Jeremiah’s day. According to this wicked mentality, it was OK if the weak are stomped on, oppressed, or even killed, for they are “little” ones, “little” ones that don’t really count. Their suffering and death—their struggles and abandonment—they don’t really matter, for all of this is simply a “sacrifice” that the “weak” must make to ensure that the “great” keep their position and power.

According to Mark, this is the way of “the Gentiles.” It’s not the way of those shepherds whose name is “The Lord is our righteousness.”

### *Scripture to Read*

1 Samuel 8:4–6, 11–20

### *Comment 10*

According to 1 Samuel 8, the Jewish people ask for a king because they want to “be like all the nations.” They want to follow in the ways of the Gentiles rather than in the ways of God.

Samuel responds by telling them of the horrors that a king will bring. But the people are not deterred. They demand a king, a ruler, a human authority who will “lord it over” them.

### *Comment 11*

The Gospel of Mark portrays the disciples of Jesus as equally flawed. Like the early Jews who demanded a king, the disciples have adopted the wrong mentality. It’s the mentality of “the Gentiles,” the mentality of “the nations.”

The lust for power and glory—and our willingness to “sacrifice” others for the sake of our own privilege and power—these are among the very things from which Mark wants Jesus to free us.

### *For Discussion*

How does this unrighteous mentality mani-

fest itself among God’s people today?

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 10:42–44

### *Comment 12*

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus describes the hierarchy and power structures of the Gentile world. Then Jesus tells his disciples in no uncertain terms that these lusts for power are to find no home among them. None of this spirit or behavior is to be found among those who are his followers.

Instead, those who follow Jesus are to become great through ministering to others. In God’s world, Mark tells us, the chief places of honor will go not to those who scheme for power or have the money to buy their way to the top. Rather, the chief places of honor will go to those who are serving others.

### *For Discussion*

How do you think the disciples feel when they hear Jesus’ words?

Why is the mentality of the world so tempting?

How do you think God’s people are doing today in terms of keeping Jesus’ commandment?

What, if anything, should we be doing differently?

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 10:45

### *Comment 13*

The Jesus who we find in Mark is someone who turns the world’s values upside down. In Jesus, we meet someone of great power. He heals. He forgives. He embraces. A voice from heaven calls him “God’s beloved.” In scene after scene, he speaks with authority.

Yet, in Mark’s portrait, he is completely unlike the rulers of his day—or our day. He doesn’t expect others to bow at his feet. He doesn’t expect honor and glory. He doesn’t ask others to meet his needs. Instead, he meets theirs. He gives him-

self to others, even those whom the world would ignore.

#### *Comment 14*

In Mark 10:45, Jesus calls himself “the son of man.” The title that he prefers for himself is nothing grand. In effect, he simply calls himself a “child of Adam.” He emphasizes those things which make him common. He stresses the qualities that unite him with everyone else.

He further explains that his purpose is to “minister.” Unlike any king or ruler that the world has known, he doesn’t come expecting to be served. Rather, he comes to serve.

#### *Comment 15*

The nature of Jesus’ service is seen in his final comment, where he says that he is giving his life as “a ransom for many.”

When Mark was written, the word *ransom* was used for buying someone’s freedom from slavery. It could also refer to money paid to get a prisoner out of jail or to set free a captive in a war.

What Mark seems to be saying is that we should see Jesus’ life as a costly ministry to others. It’s not just any kind of ministry. It’s the costly ministry of liberation. According to Mark, Jesus’ goal was to “ransom” the victims of violence and hierarchy, the victims of an evil mentality that says that some people deserve to “lord it over” others.

#### *Comment 16*

Mark says that the “ransom” that Jesus brings is not for the privileged few. It’s not just for the high and mighty. He isn’t focused on some narrowly defined elite group. Rather, Mark declares that Jesus devotes his life as “a ransom for *many*.” In other words, there was not a captive anywhere that Jesus did not wish to free.

This picture of Jesus is the exact opposite of what 1 Samuel 8 says that a “king” will do. Instead of modeling himself on the ways of “the nations,” Jesus has modeled himself on that shepherd of whom Jeremiah foresees, the shepherd whose

ways so closely resemble God’s own that he can rightly be called “The Lord is our righteousness.”

#### *For Discussion*

Mark portrays Jesus as saying that his followers should be serving others, just as he served. Mark says that Jesus’ mission was to “ransom” as many people as possible from whatever enslaved them or held them captive, even if that liberating action was costly. Who, then, should we be “ransoming”—and how?

#### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 31:9–11

#### *Comment 17*

In talking about Jesus as one who “ransoms” many, Mark is portraying Jesus as someone who follows in the ways of God, for the book of Jeremiah describes God as a loving shepherd who “ransoms” those who are weak, gathering them out of the mean-spirited hands of those who are strong.

A related image also appears in the book of Isaiah.

#### *Scripture to Read*

Isaiah 35:3–6, 9–10

#### *Comment 18*

In using the language of “ransom,” Mark is perhaps suggesting that the ministry of Jesus is a fulfillment of God’s promise, a sign that the hand of God is close at hand. It’s as if the vision of Isaiah 35 has come to pass. Weak hands are strengthened. Feeble knees are made strong. The eyes of the blind are opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

When the “ransomed” of the Lord are gathered, they will no longer need to fear the “lions” and “ravenous beasts” of this world, those power-hungry individuals who constantly seek to “lord it over” those who are “first” in God’s eyes. Through the costly “ransoming” work of the Lord and the Lord’s followers, “joy and gladness” will come to

those who have previously known only “sorrow and sighing.”

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 10:46

### *Comment 19*

Jesus and the disciples are headed to Jerusalem. On their way, they pass through Jericho. It’s a common route used by Jewish pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem for religious feasts and festivals. So when Mark tells us that Jesus and the disciples are part of a large crowd that is walking together to the holy city, we shouldn’t be surprised.

Jewish feasts and festivals are happy affairs. So it’s likely that the crowd with Jesus is noisy and joyous. After all, they’re “marching to Zion,” the glorious city of God. Through each step of the way, they’re remembering the goodness and strength of a Lord who has endlessly stood with them—and with their ancestors.

### *Comment 20*

Jericho is about fifteen miles from Jerusalem. So it’s a convenient stopping point for many pilgrims. Mark doesn’t offer many details. But early readers of this Gospel would readily assume that Jesus has spent the night there.

Mark’s focus is on what happens when Jesus and the disciples leave the city. He tells us that they pass a blind beggar named Bartimaeus. This isn’t surprising, for in Jesus’ day, poor and disabled people often sat along the roads where pilgrims would pass. Perhaps they had found that those who were on their way to Jerusalem were more generous than those who were simply hurrying to work. The sick and the disabled would beg for coins or bread—or for whatever a passing pilgrim might be able to share.

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 10:47–48

### *Comment 21*

Day after day, Bartimaeus has sat there. Great

throng of pilgrims have passed him by. A few have perhaps given him coins or bread—but not many. Now a new group is heading out from the city for the final day’s walk into Jerusalem.

Bartimaeus’s eyes are weak, but like so many who are blind, his hearing is sharp. And as this crowd passes, he hears someone say something about “Jesus of Nazareth” being with them.

### *Comment 22*

Bartimaeus has apparently heard of Jesus. He knows something of his power and love. So he calls out, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!”

The crowd hushes him. They’re on their way to Jerusalem. It’s a full fifteen miles, and the road is rough. It will be a full day’s walk. They don’t want to be delayed. They can’t afford not to make it to Jerusalem by nightfall.

“Shut up, you blind beggar!” they say.

But Bartimaeus keeps calling, now all the louder. “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!”

### *Comment 23*

This is the only place in the Gospel of Mark where Jesus is called “son of David.”

In Mark’s day, “son of David” is a term of political significance. In the minds of many, David had been Israel’s greatest king. A “son of David” was a king in waiting. A “son of David” was someone destined to become the political ruler of the nation, just like David and his descendants had been.

### *Comment 24*

Many scholars believe that Mark was written in the midst of a civil war in Palestine that lasted from the year 66 to the year 70. During that time, violent revolutionaries tried to throw off the heavy yoke of Roman rule through actions that we might call “terrorism.” According to historical documents, these murderous leaders who sought to be Israel’s new “king” typically referred to themselves as “son of David.”

Instead of using love, grace, and nonviolence,

as Jesus did, they went about spreading death and destruction. Their model was the ways of “the Gentiles,” the violent, power-hungry ways of the Romans.

#### *Comment 25*

So when Bartimaeus refers to Jesus as “son of David,” he is using a very loaded political term. But given the larger context, it’s clear that Mark is using this story to show us that Jesus is *not* the usual king. He is *not* another David in waiting. And he is certainly not like those “lions” who seek to “lord it over” others.

Jesus has come to minister. Jesus has come to serve. Jesus has come to “ransom” all who have been victims of the old ways of violence and greed, all who have been pushed down by those arrogant few who think that it is OK to sacrifice others in order to ensure their own advancement.

#### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 10:49

#### *Comment 26*

The crowd is ready to hurry on to Jerusalem. They don’t have time for this poor beggar. But when Jesus hears him calling, he stops in his tracks. The crowd wants to push forward, but Jesus refuses to move. He insists that Bartimaeus be brought to him.

The language in this verse—and the healing that is about to happen—seem designed to bring to mind again both Isaiah 35 and Jeremiah 31.

#### *Scripture to Read*

Isaiah 35:5, 10

#### *Comment 27*

When the “ransomed” of the Lord are gathered, then the eyes of the blind are opened. When ministry happens as God intends it to happen, then sorrow and sighing flee away.

#### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 10:49–50

#### *Comment 28*

In Mark’s day, beggars often spread their cloaks in front of them. The cloak served as a place for pilgrims to toss whatever they were able to give. The cloak was a beggar’s source of survival—but it was a demeaning survival, a survival that kept them “last” in the eyes of the world.

When Jesus asks for Bartimaeus to be brought to him, those who approach the beggar deliver a “ransoming” message. “Be of good comfort,” they say. These are radical words, biblical words, for those who approach Bartimaeus are not telling him to “relax.” They’re not telling him to “cheer up.” They’re telling him to be empowered. They’re telling him be “fortified” with a liberating power from on high. Their “comforting” message to Bartimaeus is a direct echo of the “ransoming” vision of Jeremiah.

#### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 31:10–11, 13

#### *Comment 29*

To be “ransomed” is to be gathered by a shepherd who wants to make God’s scattered children whole. And as the book of Jeremiah makes clear, to be “ransomed” is also to be “comforted.” Those who have been beaten are raised up. Those who have spent their life in mourning because of the evil that others have done to them suddenly begin to dance.

So in the Gospel of Mark, it is when Bartimaeus is told to “be of good comfort” that he “rises.” He breaks free from his cloak, that garment that was such a sorrowful sign of his meager financial survival. He rises and comes to Jesus—for through the delivery of “comfort,” Bartimaeus senses that a remarkable spirit of “ransom” and liberation is in the air.

#### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 10:35–37, 50–51

### *For Discussion*

What do you notice about the way in which Mark words Jesus' question to James and John in verse 36 and the way in which Mark words Jesus' question to Bartimaeus in verse 51?

What do you think Mark wants us to learn from the two answers that he reports?

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 10:52

### *Comment 30*

For some of us, the story of Bartimaeus may be "familiar." It's often the subject of sermons. We may remember it as an example of faith or as an example of Jesus' grace and love.

But we often forget its context. We forget that it comes in the same chapter as the story of a rich landowner—the exact opposite of poor Bartimaeus. When Jesus asks this rich landowner to sell what he has and follow him, the man goes away sorrowful. He's more attached to his wealth than to his God.

### *Comment 31*

It's easy to forget that Mark has placed the story of Bartimaeus right after a discussion of "greatness." It's easy to forget that Mark has placed the story right after Jesus' repudiation of the old ways of "kingship." It's easy to forget that Mark wants us to read the story as an example of how Jesus gave new meaning to the phrase "son of David."

Jesus isn't a "king" in the old sort of way. He is not a man of violence. He is not given to bossing others around. He never abuses the weak. He never seeks his own glory.

### *Comment 32*

The story as Mark unfolds it is filled with biblical allusions. Not only does Mark connect the story to texts found in the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah, but he also contrasts it with an ugly sort of story about King David in 2 Samuel.

We often think of David as a great king with deep spiritual commitments, and like all of us, he

could be very good at times. But he was also a *king* like the "kings" of the nations. He was a man who insisted on getting his way, a man who killed and slaughtered, a man who sinned greatly before God—not just once but many times. And there is a horrible story about him in 2 Samuel 5, a story not often told to Sunday school children.

### *Scripture to Read*

2 Samuel 5:3–6

### *Comment 33*

As this text makes clear, when David first became king, he ruled from the town of Hebron, an ancient town, still much in the news as a place of conflict between Israel and Palestine.

For seven and a half years, David ruled in Hebron because Jerusalem was controlled by another people, a people known as the Jebusites.

David wanted to capture Jerusalem, but the Jebusites were strong. According to verse 6, they taunted David, saying, "You will never be able to come into Jerusalem. We are so strong that even our blind and our lame will turn you back."

### *Comment 34*

In response to these taunts, King David plotted with his army about how to get into the city. David told his soldiers to sneak into Jerusalem through the water shafts while the people of the city weren't watching.

Finally in 2 Samuel 5:8, David tells his soldiers that when they get into the city through the water tunnels (translated in the King James Version as "gutters"), they should begin by attacking and killing the blind and the lame. King David tells them that they should do this because it is the blind and the lame "that David hates."

In direct contrast to the Jesus whom we meet in the Gospel of Mark, David is willing to sacrifice these lowly ones for the sake of his own triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

### *Comment 35*

In Mark's gracious drama, Jesus is on a jour-

ney to Jerusalem. Just before he enters the city, he encounters a blind man who is crying out, “Son of David, have mercy!”

Whether Bartimaeus cries out in terror or in hope, we cannot know. What we can know is that Mark wants us to understand that Jesus is *not* a king like David, for this blind man is *not* slaughtered like King David would have had him slaughtered on his own triumphant entry into Jerusalem.

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 10:47–51

### *Comment 36*

This Jesus is no “son of David,” for this Jesus is faithful to the deepest visions of Isaiah and Jeremiah. This Jesus is no “son of David,” for this Jesus shows mercy. This Jesus is no “son of David,” for this Jesus stops in his tracks to “ransom” a man from the illness that afflicts him. This Jesus is no “son of David,” for this Jesus is there to liberate and not to oppress. This Jesus is no “son of David,” for this Jesus is fostering faith and not practicing hate.

As Mark makes clear, Bartimaeus is transformed in the process. After he has been “comforted,” after he has been “ransomed,” he ceases addressing Jesus as “son of David.” Now he calls him “lord” and “master,” not as a sign of subjugation but liberation.

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 50:4–5

Mark 10:52

### *Comment 37*

When Bartimaeus’s sight is restored, we’re told that he follows Jesus “on the way.”

He follows Jesus not just on the road to Jerusalem but on “the holy way” that Isaiah 35 calls the “way of the redeemed.”

### *Comment 38*

Those who have been weeping and those who

have been forced to wander to and fro, says the book of Jeremiah, they shall come together, gathered by a shepherd rather than by a “king.” It’s a shepherd who embodies God’s own righteous values, God’s own righteous behaviors.

Then the gathered crowd, says Jeremiah, will set forth together on “the way to Zion,” the “way” that embodies a “perpetual covenant” between God and God’s people, a covenant “that shall not be forgotten,” a covenant that spells out a new way of living, a new way of serving, a new way of reaching out to others. It’s a “way” in which “greatness” is found not in glory but in service.

### *Comment 39*

As this portion of Mark’s Gospel closes, we find Jesus and Bartimaeus—and a whole throng of other pilgrims—continuing their journey to Jerusalem. It’s only fifteen miles. If they walk hard and don’t tire, they’ll make it by nightfall.

A festive spirit has returned. The eager crowd laughs and rejoices together as they journey on “the way to Zion.” Somewhere in the midst of the crowd, Mark wants us to imagine a beggar named Bartimaeus, “ransomed” from his cloak, “ransomed” from his blindness, “ransomed” from his fears, “ransomed” from his terrors.

We don’t know what he’s saying. We don’t know what he’s thinking. But if we were to catch a glimpse of his lips, we might imagine him quietly singing,

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
that saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost but now am found,  
was blind but now I see!*

# Jerusalem!



A look at the Gospel of Mark's description of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem with special attention to related passages from the book of Jeremiah

## SESSION 2: Mark 11:1-11

# Open my eyes that I may see...

### Comment 1

As we saw last time, the Gospel of Mark offers a dramatic and insightful portrait of Jesus and his disciples as they journey to Jerusalem.

Such a journey is common in Jesus' day as an expression of spiritual devotion. Jewish pilgrims would often time their trip to coincide with one of the major Jewish feasts, such as the Feast of Tabernacles or the Feast of Passover. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they would worship at the temple and renew their faith.

### For Discussion

What kinds of thoughts and feelings do you think would be running through the hearts and minds of pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals? Can you think of a situation in our own experience that might generate similar feelings?

### Comment 2

In Mark's drama, Jesus and his disciples seem to be part of a large band of Jewish pilgrims who are traveling together to Jerusalem. As they pass through Jericho on their way to Jerusalem, a poor, blind beggar named Bartimaeus cries out for mercy. The crowd tries to pass him by, but Bartimaeus won't be ignored. Bartimaeus cries out again to Jesus, and Jesus insists that Bartimaeus be brought to him.

When Jesus and Bartimaeus meet, Bartimaeus asks for his sight to be restored. Jesus heals him. Mark then tells us that Bartimaeus joins Jesus and the disciples on their journey. It's another fifteen miles or more to Jerusalem. The road is rough and dangerous. Even so, pilgrims often tried to make it from Jericho to Jerusalem in a single day.

### Scripture to Read

Jeremiah 39:1, 4-5a

### Comment 3

When Mark portrays Jesus and his followers as journeying from Jericho to Jerusalem, he is giving us a portrait that is the direct opposite of one that is found in the book of Jeremiah.

In Mark, Jesus repudiates the traditional role of "kingship" and anything that amounts to "lording it over" others. He says that he has come to serve rather than to be served. With all of that in mind, Mark tells us that Jesus proceeds to travel from Jericho to Jerusalem.

### Comment 4

There's something quite the opposite in the book of Jeremiah. The last king of Judah is named Zedekiah. Unlike Jesus, he hasn't been interested in "serving" those who are weak and frail. Nor has he wanted to connect his life with that of God. Rather,

he has sought to “be served,” believing with the rest of the Jerusalem establishment that he could insure his own glory, create his own power, and build up his own standing in the eyes of the world.

Zedekiah tries to go his own way—and fails. When the army of Babylon attacks Jerusalem, this proud, self-serving king—this man who thought he could make it on his own—is forced to flee. He flees from Jerusalem to Jericho, taking the opposite path from the one on which we find Jesus walking.

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 39:5–7

### *Comment 5*

The army of Babylon is also known as the army of the Chaldeans. According to the book of Jeremiah, the forces of Babylon capture King Zedekiah—the last ruler in the fallen line of David. They capture him in Jericho.

After Zedekiah is captured in Jericho, we’re told that the king of Babylon orders Zedekiah’s eyes pulled out. He’s blinded, wrapped in chains, and then carried in tears to Babylon.

### *Comment 6*

The contrast to what we find in Mark is remarkable. In Mark, it’s in Jericho that Jesus repudiates “kingship” in the usual sense. And it’s in Jericho that Jesus restores the sight of blind Bartimaeus. Unlike King Zedekiah, Bartimaeus is no longer in chains. He’s been “ransomed.” He’s been liberated.

Mark says that with joy, Bartimaeus walks with Jesus. He walks with Jesus not to Babylon but to Jerusalem, the “glorious city of God,” the very city from which Zedekiah, the last of the kings of David, was forced to flee.

### *Comment 7*

Portraying a reversal from an ancient image found in the book of Jeremiah, Mark seems to be suggesting that when we live with arrogance and pride, trusting only in ourselves, we lose our sight. We lose our hope. We are taken captive by “lions” and other “savage beasts.”

But when we walk with Jesus in the ways of mercy and grace, sight is restored. Chains fall away. We begin walking in the way of the “redeemed.” We begin walking in the way of those who know that they have been “ransomed,” who know that they have been set free. It’s the way of those who are seeking to be a part of God’s “ransoming” work in the world.

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:1–2

### *Comment 8*

The scene that is about to unfold here in Mark is sometimes called “the triumphant entry into Jerusalem.” It’s the scene that we remember on Palm Sunday.

But in Mark’s Gospel, the scene is not very “triumphant” in the usual sense. The Roman authorities do not even notice what’s happening. The leaders of the temple are nowhere to be found. As in the book of Jeremiah, the political and religious leaders of Jerusalem are too busy with their own affairs to realize what God is doing.

### *For Discussion*

In a world that is overflowing with a never-stopping mass media and in a world in which we ourselves are often consumed with the demands of daily living, what can we do to be more aware of what God is doing in the world today?

### *Comment 9*

What Mark lays out for us is nothing glorious. He describes a rag-tag procession of poor, rural Jews, a group of seemingly unimportant people that no one in the Jerusalem power structure would view as significant.

As these folks approach the city, they approach as so many other pilgrims to Jerusalem have come. They come with joy and gladness.

### *Comment 10*

But in Mark’s telling of the story, there is an undercurrent of something else. Mark injects the story with irony and anticipation. It’s as if we are being

prepared for an important new turn in the “good news” that Mark wants us to hear.

Mark begins this scene by telling us that Jesus and his companions have come “nigh unto Jerusalem.” In other words, they are on the outskirts of the city. The villages of Bethphage and Bethany are just east of Jerusalem. When you get to Bethphage or Bethany, you’re almost there.

#### *Comment 11*

The Gospel of Mark throws in another detail as well. It says that as Jesus and the others approach Jerusalem, the “Mount of Olives” is nearby. Mark doesn’t elaborate on this in any way. So at first glance, it might feel like an insignificant or meaningless detail.

But biblical writers seldom throw in details just for the sake of adding more words to the text. Normally, details are there because the writer thought that they were meaningful in some way.

#### *Comment 12*

The Mount of Olives was a hill that rose 2,600 feet above sea level, just east of Jerusalem. By itself, that seems irrelevant to the story. Why even mention it?

One possible reason for mentioning it is because for Jews of Mark’s day, the Mount of Olives was far more than just a hill. For Jews of Mark’s day, the Mount of Olives was also full of prophetic significance.

#### *Scripture to Read*

Zechariah 14:1–4a, 8–9

#### *Comment 13*

Because of scriptures like these, many Jews believed that someday God would come to save Jerusalem from the hand of foreign nations. And they believed that when that day came, God would enter the city from the east, from the Mount of Olives.

#### *Scripture to Read*

Ezekiel 43:1–2

#### *Comment 14*

The book of Ezekiel, written either during or after the time of Jewish exile in Babylon, foresees a day when the glory of God approaches the eastern gate of Jerusalem—the very gate that faces the Mount of Olives.

Later in this same chapter of Ezekiel, we’re told that the glory of God, which is like “a noise of many waters,” comes into the “house of the Lord.” But God’s glory is too great to be contained there. It fills the house and then spills forth, shining on “all the earth.”

#### *Comment 15*

By telling us that Jesus approaches Jerusalem from the east—and by telling us that Jesus approaches Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives—Mark seems to be asking us to remember the visions of Zechariah and Ezekiel. He is perhaps suggesting that the “glory” of God is indeed coming to Jerusalem, a “glory” that is like “the sound of many waters,” a “glory” that will spill out of the temple in Jerusalem and fill “all the earth.”

But there’s an implicit question in this for all of us as well. When the “glory” of God comes close, when the hand of God is at work in *our* world and in *our* time, will we see it? Will we hear it? Or will we be too busy with our own affairs to even recognize that “glory” when it comes?

#### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:1–2

#### *Comment 16*

As the crowd moves toward Jerusalem and as it passes near the Mount of Olives, Jesus pauses.

By now, it’s most likely late in the day. The shadows are growing longer. Evening is near. Jesus and his followers are undoubtedly tired from their journey. Everyone is anxious to make it to Jerusalem by nightfall.

#### *Comment 17*

Before going any further toward Jerusalem, Jesus takes aside two of his disciples. He tells them to go

into a village, probably either Bethany or Bethphage. He tells them to keep their eyes open as they walk into town. On the outskirts of the village, says Jesus, they will see a colt tied up.

The word used by Mark could mean a young horse or a young ass. But given the way that the story unfolds, it's probably a young ass, a small, humble animal that was common in both Africa and Asia.

The ass will be so young, says Jesus, that no one will have yet ridden on it. He then tells them that when they find the animal, they should untie and bring it to him.

### *For Discussion*

If you had been one of these two disciples, how do you think you would have felt about what Jesus was asking you to do?

Based on the reports that we have of Jesus' teachings, what are the things that he asks *us* to do that you find hardest to accomplish—or most puzzling in meaning?

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:3

### *For Discussion*

If you had been one of these two disciples, sent to get a colt for Jesus, would this new instruction from Jesus have made it feel any easier? Why or why not?

What do you think Jesus means by suggesting that his disciples explain to any bystanders that they are talking the colt because “the lord has need of him”? Do you think that Jesus is talking about himself—or someone else? Why or why not? And if he isn't talking about himself, who could he possibly mean?

### *Comment 18*

Many translations of Mark 11:3 put a capital letter in front of “lord,” but the original text of Mark was written without capital letters anywhere. So using a capital letter here is an interpretation, not a literal translation of the text.

The effect of a capital letter in this context is to

cause to think that Jesus is telling his disciples to speak to any bystanders who might question them as they take the colt and tell them that Jesus himself needs it. Because we modern Christians often use the word “Lord” when we mean Jesus, that's a natural assumption. But it's an assumption that doesn't make much sense with the story as a whole.

### *Comment 19*

Throughout Mark, Jesus rejects any titles of “respect” for himself. He never calls himself “lord.” He never seeks status or honor. When he talks about himself, he almost always refers to himself simply as “the son of man,” meaning an ordinary offspring of Adam like everyone else. So it would be very surprising if in this context he suddenly started calling himself “lord.”

Bible scholars have suggested at least two alternate possibilities for what the word “lord” means here.

### *Comment 20*

The first possibility assumes the ordinary, everyday use of the word “lord.” In Jesus' day, a “lord” was simply an owner or a master.

Those who follow this approach suggest that Jesus may have met the owner of the colt on his journey. Perhaps the owner was walking with Jesus and offered the colt for Jesus' use. If so, that would explain why Jesus suggests that the disciples will be questioned not by the owner of the colt but by “bystanders.” Perhaps Jesus is simply asking the disciples to reassure any bystanders that the “owner” of the colt has asked them to take it, and that they will be bringing it back as soon as the intended use of the colt is complete.

### *Comment 21*

The second possibility is that “the lord” refers not to any human being but to God.

If this is the case, then Jesus is telling his disciples to explain that the colt is needed for some important work that God is undertaking. This would be a way of giving symbolic significance to what is about to happen. It would also fit with a reference in Mark

1:3, where John the Baptist is described as preparing “the way of the Lord,” a Lord who is making a new way through the wilderness, a way out of no way. “Lord” was how many Jews referred to God.

### *For Discussion*

In a passage like this, which meaning for the word “lord” makes most sense to you? Why?

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:4–6

### *Comment 22*

The two disciples go into the village. Just as Jesus has said, they find a young ass tied up near a house, at a place where two paths cross. Some residents of the village are standing nearby. The disciples feel a bit uneasy. They’re from Galilee, which is looked down on in these parts. Their accent is different. Their clothing is poor. Their journey has been long.

But they don’t want to let Jesus down. So they go to the young animal and begin to untie it.

### *Comment 23*

The colt isn’t theirs, of course, but they’ve been told to take it for a short time. So they do.

Immediately, however, some of the bystanders begin to question them. “What are you doing?” they ask. “Where are you taking that colt?”

The two disciples respond with the words that Jesus has given them—and before the disciples know what’s happening, the bystanders have completely dropped their objection.

### *For Discussion*

Why are some people more courageous—and others more cautious—in violating social norms and expectations for the sake of what is right?

How can we deepen our courage in difficult situations?

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:7–8

### *For Discussion*

What sort of scene is being described here?

Does it sound big and impressive—or casual and informal? What sort of “feel” does the description convey to you—and why?

How do you think the participants would have interpreted what was happening?

### *Comment 24*

On one level, the scene as Mark describes it is almost comic. Two disciples bring a young and untrained ass to Jesus, an animal that has no experience whatsoever in carrying a rider.

While big crowds of Jewish pilgrims pass by on their way to the festivities in Jerusalem, the disciples throw a couple of their outer cloaks across the back of the little colt to create a make-shift saddle for Jesus to sit upon. Jesus then climbs up on the little animal’s back. The colt jerks and stutters, not quite sure what to do.

### *Comment 25*

Most likely, many of the passersby don’t even notice what is happening. At that time, thousands of people would head to Jerusalem for major religious festivals. And by the time that they would get this close to the city, most would be focused on what lies ahead rather than anything that was happening among a small group of folk gathered around a colt on the side of the road.

The little group that is traveling with Jesus tries to make the event festive by putting their garments down in front of the colt. Or maybe the road is muddy or sloppy and they’re simply trying to get the little animal to move forward through the muck.

### *Comment 26*

Mark also says that some of the group cast leafy branches down on the road in front of the colt. The King James Version describe these as having been cut off of nearby trees, but newer versions more accurately translate the text by indicating that the leafy material was cut from nearby *fields*. It might have simply been stalks of grass or small leafy plants.

Mark never mentions “palms.” In fact, unless

the climate was different in those days, palm trees would not have been growing in the area around Jerusalem. At least, they don't naturally grow there now.

#### *Comment 27*

Contrary to our typical language about this story, there is no mention of any of this happening on the first day of the week. Mark doesn't even connect the events with a particular time of the year. In fact, many biblical scholars speculate that it probably occurred in the fall, just before the traditional autumn Feast of Tabernacles or Booths, rather than in the spring, when we normally think of it happening.

For Mark, the scene undoubtedly conveys an important message. But it's not a message that has anything to do with "palms." Nor does it have anything to do with a festive Sunday in the spring.

#### *Comment 28*

Whoever wrote the Gospel of Mark was well acquainted with the Jewish scriptures. Often, the author of this Gospel wants us to connect the events he describes with specific texts from the Jewish scriptures, but he's seldom heavy-handed about this. He simply expects us to know and understand the scriptures as he does, but many of us don't know the scriptures like people of old did. So we have to put a little more effort into uncovering the connections.

And if we were to investigate the details of this story, we would find an amazing connection to the words of the prophet Zechariah—words which were treasured by devout Jews of Mark's day as a promise of God's coming deliverance.

#### *Scripture to Read*

Zechariah 9:8–10

#### *Comment 29*

Because of the depth of their oppression and the length of their suffering, many Jewish people in Jesus' day and in Mark's day longed for a political and religious messiah, someone who would march into Jerusalem as a mighty warrior, someone who would slaughter all of their oppressors—or at least

drive them away.

There was an expectation that such a messiah would ride into Jerusalem on a great horse, in the manner of a triumphant military leader. Indeed, many would-be revolutionaries gathered their followers on the Mount of Olives and then came riding into Jerusalem in the manner of a king, waiting to be crowned. Inevitably, however, what followed was simply more bloodshed, more killing, more violence, more pain, and more despair. Every such effort was crushed.

#### *Comment 30*

With an eye toward the words of Zechariah, Mark seems to portray Jesus' own entry into Jerusalem as the entry of a very different kind of messiah. He comes not with a sword but with a heart of love. He comes not with a great army but with a rag-tag bunch of followers, one of whom had been a blind beggar in Jericho just the day before.

The Romans never even notice this "messiah" coming into the city, for it's not the kind of "messiah" that they've learned to fear. Most of the other pilgrims miss him as well. Even those who join his caravan probably don't have a very clear understanding of what's happening. He comes without herald. He comes without notice. He comes with irony—and even a bit of comedy.

#### *Comment 31*

Yet he comes as Zechariah foresaw, for he comes on a colt, humble and lowly, riding a nervous and uncertain ass, an ass not yet trained to handle anyone on its back.

He comes as Zechariah foresaw, for he comes demonstrating that God has truly seen the suffering of the lowly.

He comes as Zechariah foresaw, for he comes with both justice and salvation in his hands.

#### *Comment 32*

He comes as Zechariah foresaw, for he comes not with a sword or a bow.

He comes as Zechariah foresaw, for he comes to bring an end to the violent world of chariots and

armies.

He comes as Zechariah foresaw, for he comes to “speak peace,” even to the Gentiles, even to the oppressors, for his kingdom and his dominion “shall be from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth.”

### *For Discussion*

If this is how God’s true messiah comes, what does that mean for how we who follow this messiah should be living?

### *Scripture to Read*

Psalm 118:24–26

Mark 11:9–10

### *Comment 33*

The group traveling with Jesus moves toward the city. The temple, which is high on a hill, has most likely come into view. As they walk toward this city whose very name means “City of Peace,” the pilgrims in Mark’s Gospel sing from Psalm 118, one of the traditional psalms that had been sung by generations of Jewish pilgrims as they approached Jerusalem. The words that Mark quotes come directly from that psalm.

In describing the words that the pilgrims sing, many English translations of Mark use the word “hosanna,” which was a Jewish plea or prayer meaning, “Save us, please!” or “Save us now!”

### *Comment 34*

The scene as Mark describes it is full of ironies. For example, the first syllable in the Hebrew word “hosanna” is also found in Jesus’ own name, for his name simply means, “God saves.” In other words, the pilgrims’ plea and prayer has been heard. The answer is already walking with them.

Another irony comes in one of the lines of the psalm that the pilgrim sing: “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” The pilgrims sing these words about themselves, as pilgrims typically did. The words are an expression of the blessing that it is for Jews to come to Jerusalem “in the name of the Lord.” But with a slight “wink,” Mark seems to

suggest that there is a double level of truth here as well. Although the pilgrims are singing about themselves, the Jesus who is with them is more fully coming “in the name of the Lord” than any of them have ever imagined.

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:11

### *Comment 35*

At first, verse 11 can seem almost like a letdown. Jesus and his companions arrive in Jerusalem, the same city in which the prophet Jeremiah tried to deliver a liberating message that was not well received by the city’s religious and political elite.

Jesus and his fellow travelers come in through the eastern gate, the gate that faces the Mount of Olives. Throngs of others must have been coming at the same time, for the religious festivals always drew a great crowd. There would normally be a lot of joy and excitement in the air.

But in Mark’s telling of the story, it’s as if once Jesus and his companions arrive, the bustling crowd disappears.

### *Comment 36*

No more does Mark mention singing pilgrims. It’s as if everyone has scattered. Perhaps they’re looking for lodging for the night. Perhaps they’re visiting with friends. Perhaps they’ve gone off to get some food or some supplies.

Alone and abandoned, Jesus wanders over to the temple, the sacred place where God is to be honored and praised. The stone walls and rock floors stand quiet and empty. Mark shows us Jesus standing in the temple courtyard, alone. He looks around. If anyone is there, no one pays attention.

### *Comment 37*

In Jesus’ day, there seems to have been an assumption that a triumphant messiah would someday march into Jerusalem with swords and shields, armies and chariots. This highly acclaimed messiah would head to the temple. There he would be crowned as the “son of David” and “mighty king.”

Through his description of Jesus' entry into the temple, Mark seems to be reminding us that Jesus is *not* that kind of messiah. He has no army. He has no sword. He has no recognition. He goes alone to the temple. No one sees him. No one crowns him. No one hails him.

#### *Comment 38*

God is ready to save. God is ready to redeem. God is ready to set an oppressed people free. But God is not doing any of this in the way that many religious people had come to expect.

Instead, God has come on an untrained colt, on a jittery ass. God has come in a rag-tag bunch of beggars, singing psalms that they don't understand.

#### *Scripture to Read*

Malachi 3:1–2a

#### *Comment 39*

In his telling of the story, Mark may be hoping to remind us of these verses from Malachi, where the prophet declares that the Lord will “suddenly come to his temple.” The coming is certain. The coming is sure. But the coming, suggests the prophet, will be when we least expect it.

So the question arises—both for Malachi and for Mark—will we recognize the work of God when it appears? Will we endure, ready to welcome with joy the one whom God sends to our aid?

#### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 7:1–4

#### *Comment 40*

The prophet Jeremiah comes with sadness to Jerusalem. He stands in the gate of the temple and proclaims the word of the Lord, but few want to hear him, for they are unprepared for what the Lord wishes to do. They think that their evil ways and unjust behavior won't matter. They think that they can do what they want and God will have to protect them. “After all,” they say, “we've got the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!”

Jeremiah weeps, for that temple—like the temple to which Jesus has come—is a temple that is about to fall.

#### *Comment 41*

There is much heartbreak in Mark's telling of the story. Jesus comes to Jerusalem. He's God's chosen “messenger of the covenant,” the one for whom many have longed. But no one greets him. Even the most devout religious pilgrims are too busy to notice. It's as if the whole city is like Zedekiah, the last misguided king of Judah, whose eyes were destroyed by the triumphant king of Babylon.

Standing alone in the temple, Jesus drops his head. Quietly, he turns toward the gate, meeting the twelve whom he's chosen. With heavy steps, they trudge together back to Bethany, outside the city, outside the temple, where they will finally sleep.

#### *Comment 42*

Like Malachi and Jeremiah and so many other biblical writers, Mark raises haunting questions.

When God comes among us, will we be ready?

If God comes in a way we don't expect, perhaps with the poor and lowly, perhaps in the company of a blind beggar, perhaps ignored by the high and mighty, perhaps arriving in a way that doesn't fit our preconceived notions—will our eyes be open? Will our hearts still embrace God's grace?

Or will we, like the people of Jerusalem, be too busy with our political ambitions and religious devotion and economic well-being to even notice the hand of God, the hand that is so gently and surely at work in our midst?

Perhaps reflecting on similar questions, Clara Scott wrote a hymn that includes these words:

*Open my eyes, that I may see  
glimpses of truth thou hast for me;  
place in my hands the wonderful key  
that shall unclasp and set me free.  
Silently now I wait for thee,  
ready, my God, thy will to see.  
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!*

# Jerusalem!



A look at the Gospel of Mark's description of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem with special attention to related passages from the book of Jeremiah

## SESSION 3: Mark 11:12-19

# *Come, ye disconsolate, where'er ye languish...*

### *Comment 1*

Mark has portrayed Jesus and his disciples as being on a spiritual pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They are part of a large crowd of people heading to "the holy city." Such journeys are common in Jesus' day, especially before major Jewish feasts, such as the Feast of Tabernacles or the Feast of Passover.

The conclusion to this journey, as presented in Mark, is full of double meanings. The crowd is happy. They've finally made it to Jerusalem. They wave leafy branches and pieces of grass as they sing the traditional psalms that are sung by Jewish pilgrims as they enter Jerusalem.

### *Comment 2*

One line that Mark quotes is "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." For the pilgrims, this line from Psalm 118 means that they are blessed because they are coming to Jerusalem in the name of the Lord.

But for Mark, the song has a second meaning, a meaning that the crowd doesn't yet see. Jesus is also coming to Jerusalem "in the name of the Lord," and his coming is blessed in a way that the crowd of pilgrims doesn't yet understand.

### *Comment 3*

Jesus rides the last few miles on an untrained colt. In ancient times, it was thought that a politi-

cal savior would someday ride into Jerusalem on a mighty horse, leading a great army. And when this political savior entered Jerusalem, it was assumed that he would slaughter his opponents and then move toward the temple, where he would be crowned as king.

But Mark's Gospel has Jesus riding on a young ass instead of a mighty horse. And the ass is so young that it hasn't even yet been trained to handle riders. So it's jumpy and unstable. It's almost like a parody of that day's political expectations. The only "army" that Jesus leads is a rag-tag bunch of rural pilgrims, most of whom don't even understand who he is or what he's doing.

### *Comment 4*

Then Mark shows us Jesus arriving in Jerusalem. Jesus goes to the temple—like any "messiah" might do. But no one greets him. He looks around, but the city's spiritual and political leaders are elsewhere. Even the pilgrims he came with are absent. No one crowns him. No one embraces him. So Jesus quietly heads back to Bethany, the little village where he and his disciples will spend the night.

Mark seems to suggest that God's salvation is at hand, but it hasn't come in the way that it was expected. It's come in humility rather than glory. It's speaking peace rather than waging war. It's come with love rather than a sword. The Jesus whom we

meet in Mark has turned his world's understanding of "messiah" upside down.

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:12–13

### *Comment 5*

Mark describes this scene as taking place the next morning, the morning after Jesus and the disciples have arrived in Jerusalem. They head back into the city. On the way, Jesus sees a fig tree. As the disciples watch, he goes over to the fig tree, acting as if he's looking for something to eat. But there's nothing on the tree except leaves. No figs at all.

Mark then makes a point of telling us that the lack of figs isn't surprising. After all, it isn't even the season for figs. The disciples, of course, would have known that. It would have been like seeing someone go up to an apple tree in early April, finding only a handful of young leaves, wondering aloud where the apples are.

### *For Discussion*

How would you feel if someone who was with you went up to an out-of-season fig tree and tried to find some figs?

What possible reasons can you think of for why Mark might have wanted to include this description of bizarre behavior by Jesus?

### *Comment 6*

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus uses a variety of methods to teach important truths. Sometimes he uses parables. Sometimes he uses preaching. But other times he uses "performances." These performances are dramatic and deliberate actions undertaken to illustrate a point.

According to the scriptures, many ancient Jewish prophets—including the prophet Jeremiah—also used "performances." It was a way of acting out a message that they felt compelled to convey.

### *For Discussion*

If Jesus' action with the fig tree was supposed to teach something, what are some possibilities for

what it was supposed to teach?

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 8:5–6, 12–13

### *Comment 7*

Among ancient Jews, fig trees and grape vines had symbolic significance. Both a tree loaded with figs and a vine swaying with grapes were seen as reflections of God's blessing. Each conveyed an image of a fruitful life, a life bearing fruit as God would want it to bear fruit. Fig trees full of figs conveyed a sense of peace and security and prosperity.

So when the prophet Jeremiah saw the people of Judah rushing along in their own way, doing their own thing, and never repenting of their wickedness and injustice, the prophet felt compelled to deliver the word of the Lord. Peace will be no more, he declared. "Security" will be unattainable. Prosperity will go out the window. "The figs on the fig tree will fade," he said. "And that which God has given will be taken away."

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:12–14

### *For Discussion*

What do you make of Jesus' words to the fig tree? If Jesus' words to the fig tree are not a "cursing" of the tree but rather a symbolic instruction to the disciples, then what is the message that Jesus is trying to deliver?

### *Comment 8*

Jesus goes up to a fig tree. It has leaves—but no fruit. He examines the tree—and then speaks to it.

We should perhaps imagine a deep note of sadness in Jesus' voice, for there is no indication here of anger or blasphemy. Jesus isn't "cursing." He simply sighs and says to the tree, "No one will ever eat fruit from you again. No one will be blessed by your branches. And none who are hungry will ever again find nourishment in your fruit."

Mark makes a point of telling us that the disciples "hear" Jesus' words to the fig tree. Obviously,

Mark wants *us* to hear these words as well, for they are of critical importance for all who are seeking to walk in God's own way.

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:15–16

### *Comment 9*

Mark is a skilled writer. His arrangement of the story is careful and deliberate. So we should always pay attention to the flow of one scene into another.

Mark has shown us Jesus speaking symbolically to a fig tree, declaring that its day as a sign of God's blessing is over. Immediately after, Mark takes us back to the temple. Here we find Jesus disrupting the status quo. The routines of temple life are thrown into a turmoil.

Given Mark's care, we can be sure that the close connection between these two scenes is not accidental.

### *Comment 10*

What we have in the temple is another example of Jesus teaching as so many Jewish prophets before him had taught. He teaches by his actions. He teaches by his "performance."

Through his deeds in these verses, Jesus seems to speak to the temple itself. He seems to be saying, "Your day as a sign of God's blessing is over. Your branches are empty and barren. No longer do you convey God's presence. No longer are you functioning as a sign of God's peace and God's joy."

### *Comment 11*

Mark lists four specific actions of Jesus in the temple.

First, Jesus casts out those who are buying and selling.

Second, Jesus overthrows the tables of the money changers.

Third, Jesus turns over the seats of those who are selling doves.

And fourth, Jesus blocks the way of anyone who is carrying anything through the temple.

### *For Discussion*

Who, if anyone, might be encouraged by Jesus' actions? Why? Who, if anyone, might be upset? Why? If the disciples are still with Jesus, watching his actions, what do you think might be going through their minds?

### *Comment 12*

For centuries, the temple in Jerusalem functioned for Jews as a center. It was a center of both their spiritual and their economic life.

To many of us, that might seem strange. But ancient Jewish culture made no distinction between things that are "sacred" and things that are "secular." Everything in life was to be done in keeping with God's command.

God was to function as the center of one's life. So it was natural for the temple to serve as a place of commerce and music and worship and physical healing and political wisdom and prayer—and whatever else might be a part of life. For many ages, *everything* had come together in the temple, for *everything* was to be done in a way that brought glory to God.

### *Comment 13*

So it isn't the presence of money in the temple that disturbs Jesus. Nor would Jesus find it odd that there were doves and other animals there. All of these had a role, a role that was to reflect God's own ways.

Both economically and spiritually, the temple was to be a liberating institution, a reflection of the God who "ransoms" and "redeems," a place that bore fruit in fresh hope and new life. The temple was to be a dependable dispenser of God's own blessing.

### *Comment 14*

Unfortunately, in Jesus' day, the temple had been taken over by the ruling class, much as it had been in Jeremiah's day. And it is the self-serving commercial interests of the ruling class that Jesus' actions most clearly undermine.

The "money changers" to which Mark refers are the banks of Jesus' day. People would come to

Jerusalem from all over. They would carry with them money from wherever they had come. But temple dues could be paid only in either Jewish or Tyrian “shekels.” So those who would come to Jerusalem as pilgrims would naturally look for a place to change their money into a new currency. Naturally, the bankers and “money changers” could be fair and just in their dealings—or they could find ways to make a huge profit off of their unsuspecting victims.

#### *Comment 15*

The “dove sellers” to which Mark refers were most likely selling doves for sacrifice by the poor. Doves were also used for the “purification” of women and for the “cleansing” of lepers. And as the Gospel of Mark makes clear, it was the poor, women, and lepers to whom Jesus was often drawn. These are people with whom Jesus identifies. He understands their oppression. He feels their exploitation—and he knows that in God’s eyes, it is wrong.

The “dove sellers” are part of a system that was meant to be liberating, but it’s turned into a way of making the rich richer and the poor poorer. No matter how many doves the poor buy, they’ll never be free. In violation of God’s command, these social outcasts have become inferior forever.

#### *Comment 16*

All of this activity took place in the outer courtyard of the temple, which was called “the court of the Gentiles.” It was the place where Gentiles would come to worship the God who had shown great love and liberating power.

In several places in his Gospel, Mark has shown us Jesus reaching out to these Gentiles, showing that they too are a part of God’s family. But by turning “the court of the Gentiles” into a place of exploitation and financial oppression, the Jerusalem elite has likewise undermined—or “contaminated”—the Gentiles’ place in the temple that was to be holy.

#### *Comment 17*

For Jesus, a temple that is only for Jews—and only for those rich few who can carry their fancy vessels with them into the temple—is no temple at

all. So in Mark’s telling of the story, the fourth action of Jesus in the temple is to “stand in the way” of those who are parading through the temple courtyard, carrying their exalted vessels and fancy objects designed to give them status in worship.

By standing in the pathway, halting the parade of such individuals, Jesus seems to be saying, “Stop! Don’t make a fool of God!”

#### *Comment 18*

By casting out the buyers and sellers who are profiting from the poor, by overthrowing the tables of the money changers and dove sellers, and by putting a halt to anyone who is carrying anything in or out of the temple, Jesus is challenging the central economic system of his day.

Like Jeremiah the prophet, Jesus is not attacking Jewish worship traditions. He’s not attacking the very faith to which he is committed. Rather, he is expressing what he feels is God’s outrage at the economic oppression practiced by those who had forgotten the core values and commandments of the Jewish religious tradition.

#### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 7:1–7

#### *Comment 19*

In the book of Jeremiah, the prophet issues a warning to God’s people. He tells them that one’s worship in “the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord” means nothing if it isn’t accompanied by righteous living.

Jeremiah says that only when a society’s social and economic deeds are in keeping with God’s values does that society’s worship truly connect with the God who cares so mightily for widows, orphans, and strangers. Or, as Jesus has suggested to his disciples, without righteous living, there is no “fruit” in our worship, no “figs” on our tree.

#### *For Discussion*

What are some of the situations today, if any, that might justify a “cleansing” of our society? What should be the role of faithful people in any

such “cleansing”?

*Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:17

*Comment 20*

The scene that Mark paints for us in the temple is mostly a scene of action. But Mark includes as well the substance of some teaching about the temple. The words used here in Mark are direct quotes from two ancient Jewish prophets. It’s as if Mark wants us to see that Jesus’ actions are not a denial of Jewish teachings and traditions. Rather, Jesus is merely calling people back to what God always intended.

*Scripture to Read*

Isaiah 56:1, 3, 7

*Comment 21*

The first quotation that’s embedded in Jesus’ remarks is from the book of Isaiah. It’s a text that affirms the importance of “all people” coming together as equals in the house of God, including foreigners and even those who are sexually “different.”

*Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 7:8–11

*Comment 22*

The second quotation that’s embedded in Jesus’ remarks is from the book of Jeremiah. It’s a text that suggests that if we come to God while oppressing aliens, orphans, and widows—or while making life difficult for anyone who is poor—then even if we are making regular appearances in the house of the Lord, even if we are faithful in our worship and in our singing and in our prayer and Bible study, we are in fact “walking after other gods,” for we are living in a way that is an “abomination” to the One who has made us.

And when we behave in this way, says Jeremiah, we turn that “house” which is called by God’s name into little more than a “den of thieves.”

*For Discussion*

Do you think the “house” to which Jeremiah refers is literally the temple—or something else, perhaps something bigger? If so, what? What would be the equivalent of this “house” in today’s world?

If we truly believed that true worship depends on not only how we treat God but how our society treats others, what might we do differently?

*Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 26:1–2

*Comment 23*

As this text from Jeremiah indicates, there was a long tradition in which Jewish prophets would stand in “the court of the Lord’s house” to deliver an authoritative “word from the Lord.”

Mark has shown us Jesus fulfilling this same tradition. Like Jeremiah, Jesus “diminishes not a word.” He hides nothing. He says what is true, even if those who are there aren’t willing to hear.

*Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 26:4–6

*Comment 24*

Jeremiah is told to stand in the court of the Lord’s house and declare that if the people of Judah fail to uphold God’s will and God’s ways—if they fail to practice what has been told them through “the law” and “the prophets”—then their “house” will surely fall, just as the house at “Shiloh” fell.

Shiloh was the ancient place of worship for the northern kingdom of Israel. It was the holy place where the people of Israel first gathered to meet with God.

*Comment 25*

By the time of Jeremiah, the northern kingdom—indeed, the whole “house” of Shiloh—had already fallen to foreign invaders.

At one time, the “house” at Shiloh had been holy. Slowly and surely, however, this “house” had become a “den of robbers.” Why? Because the people of Israel had chosen to live in selfish and ar-

rogant ways. As a result, their lives had become an “abomination” to God. That caused their worship to be rejected. That caused their joyful praise to fall on deaf ears, for the Holy One *saw* how they were living, *saw* how by their lives they had begun endlessly chasing after false gods.

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 26:8–11

### *For Discussion*

Why do you suppose that the religious and political leaders of Jerusalem unite against Jeremiah and say that he deserves to die? In what kinds of situations is a similar dynamic at work in our own world?

### *Comment 26*

We’re told that after Jeremiah finished speaking “all that the Lord had commanded him to speak unto all the people,” the religious leaders of Jerusalem tell him, “Thou shalt surely die!”

A short while later, the rich nobles, described here as the “princes of Judah,” express their fury as well, stirring up “all the people” against Jeremiah. “This man is worthy of death!” declare the political leaders of Judah.

### *Comment 27*

The religious and political leaders are outraged at what Jeremiah has said. They don’t want to hear sermons like this. They want him to go away and speak no more.

Their confidence about Jeremiah’s forthcoming death is often seen as a threat. After all, it’s clear that Jerusalem’s religious and political leaders despise him. They’d love to be rid of him. But it’s also very possible—probably even likely—that they honestly believe that Jeremiah will be struck dead by God for having delivered a message in God’s name that they are “sure” must be false. More than likely, they honestly believe that God will be outraged by what Jeremiah has said.

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 26:12–15

### *Comment 28*

Jeremiah responds by assuring the people that it was “the Lord” who commanded him to speak the words that he spoke. They need to “obey the voice of the Lord,” says Jeremiah, and “amend” their ways of living and bring a stop to what they are doing, for if they do, the Lord’s plans will change—and they will be saved from the dangers that are swirling around them.

Jeremiah then demonstrates his deep confidence in the message that he has delivered by saying that his life is in their hands. They can do with him whatever they want, even put him to death—but by doing so, they will “surely bring innocent blood” upon their heads, for it will be they who find themselves caught up in an unintended tragedy—not he.

### *For Discussion*

In what ways, if any, does this scene in which Jeremiah faces the political and religious leaders of Jerusalem give added meaning to what the Gospel accounts tell us about Jesus’ own confrontation with the political and religious leaders of Jerusalem?

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:17–18

### *Comment 29*

Jesus may have been ignored during his first evening in Jerusalem when he surveyed the quiet scene at the temple, but on this particular day, no one can miss the dramatic impact of his actions.

Mark describes the temple establishment as furious. We’re told that they want to “destroy” him. They want to silence him. But it’s probably not just out of jealousy. Like the religious leaders in Jeremiah’s day, they may honestly believe that his deeply disturbing words can’t possibly be from God. They may even believe that they have a spiritual responsibility to “shut him up” lest Jesus’ very disturbing words, which they honestly believe are false, have an undue impact on “all the people.”

### *For Discussion*

What lessons should we be learning from all of this for ourselves in our own day?

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:19

### *Comment 30*

The scene as it is presented in Mark goes no further. Night comes. Jesus leaves, perhaps to spend the night in Bethany, perhaps somewhere else.

But in light of what happened in the book of Jeremiah, it's clear that a collision is coming. Jesus has delivered the "word of the Lord," challenging the rich and the powerful. He has thrown over the tables on which some of their oppression is carried out. And he has "plundered" the profoundly religious justifications that they have conveniently built up for their selfish and arrogant behavior. Jerusalem's leaders are convinced that Jesus is in the wrong, that he can't possibly be speaking a word of truth. Jesus, on the other hand, is sure that there was no other word that he could have honestly spoken.

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 3:22–23, 27

### *Comment 31*

A crisis lies ahead. Dramatic changes are underway. A deep struggle has begun.

The incident that we have examined in Mark is sometimes called the "cleansing" of the temple, but it's more than that, for it's as if Jesus has literally invaded "the strong man's house," the "house" and people of God who have literally been taken captive by the mentality of riches and greed.

### *Comment 32*

The "house" to which Jesus has come—like the "house" to which Jeremiah was sent—was to have been a "house of prayer" for *all* people. But it has become a "den of thieves."

Thieves fight for what they have, sometimes creating elaborate justifications for what they have done. For a time, it may appear that the "thieves"

are winning the battle. It may appear that they've taken over "the house." But in its early references to Jesus as "the mighty one," the Gospel of Mark has already hinted at the outcome of the conflict that is brewing.

### *Comment 33*

Because Jesus, like Jeremiah, is speaking "the word of the Lord" and because Jesus, like Jeremiah, is willing to confidently put himself in the hands of his critics, willing to confidently put himself in the hands of those who can't bring themselves to believe what he has to say, it's clear that a "house" is falling. A "mountain" is moving. Old "tables" are being brushed aside, and a new more gracious "mercy seat" is coming to take their place.

It will be a "mercy seat" for every wounded heart, a "mercy seat" that reaches out amid every human anguish, a "mercy seat" that embraces every wounded soul. Earth's sorrows may be great, but as an old hymn by Thomas Moore declares, the Gospel of Mark surely wants us to know that there is "no sorrow that heav'n cannot heal."

*Come, ye disconsolate, where'er ye languish—  
come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel.*

*Here bring your wounded hearts, here tell your  
anguish:*

*earth has no sorrow that heav'n cannot heal.*

*Joy of the desolate, light of the straying,  
hope of the penitent, fadeless and pure!*

*Here speaks the Comforter, tenderly saying,  
"Earth has no sorrow that heav'n cannot heal."*

*Here see the Bread of Life, see waters flowing  
forth from the throne of God, pure from above.*

*Come to the feast of love, come ever knowing,  
earth has no sorrow but heav'n can remove.*

# Jerusalem!



A look at the Gospel of Mark's description of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem with special attention to related passages from the book of Jeremiah

## SESSION 4: *Mark 11:19–25*

# *A rock that is higher than I...*

### *Comment 1*

In Mark's story, Jesus and the disciples have arrived in Jerusalem. One morning, as they walk from the Mount of Olives to the temple, they see a fig tree. It's not the season for figs. Yet Jesus makes quite a scene, going over to the fig tree, looking for figs.

When Jesus doesn't find any figs, he speaks to the tree. The disciples listen. They hear Jesus declare that "no one" will ever eat from this tree again. Its days of bearing fruit are finished.

### *Comment 2*

Mark seems to see this scene as a teaching action of Jesus, a teaching action much like those of ancient Jewish prophets, who used dramatic deeds and words to illustrate an important truth.

Through his actions, Jesus seems to be explaining that the days of the temple are over. The temple is not just a place of religious worship. Rather, it is the life center of the Jewish people, a symbol of God's blessing, a reminder of the "covenant" that gives them life, the "covenant" that was to manifest itself in godly behavior on their part, behavior that would reflect the righteous ways of a righteous God.

### *Comment 3*

Immediately after the scene with the fig tree, Mark describes Jesus entering the temple, that place

that represents the "covenant" between God and humanity. But in the mind of Jesus, the "covenant" is broken, just as it had been broken in the day of Jeremiah. The "house of God" has become a "house divided."

So in Mark's Gospel, we find Jesus overturning the tables of the money changers or bankers of his day, for they have begun taking advantage of the poor and the foreigners. He knocks over the chairs of those selling doves at inflated prices to women and to the sick and to all who have been labeled as socially "unfit."

### *Comment 4*

In addition, Mark shows us Jesus standing in the way of those wealthy individuals who parade through the temple carrying their rich goods, their lavish objects of sacrifice and devotion.

When questioned about his actions, Jesus quotes from both Isaiah and Jeremiah, esteemed prophets within the Jewish tradition. Quoting from Isaiah, Jesus says that the "house" or people of God is to be a "house of prayer for all people," rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, male and female. Quoting from Jeremiah, Jesus says that the "house of God" has become a "den of thieves." In other words, the people of God have cheated the poor, the orphaned, and the widowed, stealing from them the dignity and respect on which the scriptures have long insisted.

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:19–20

#### *Comment 5*

Both before and after the scene in the temple, Mark shows us Jesus passing by the fig tree. This time, as Jesus and the disciples again head into the city, the disciples notice that the fig tree—which had been fully in leaf the day before—has dried up.

### *Scripture to Read*

Psalms 1:1–6

#### *Comment 6*

Psalms 1 declares that the “godly” are those who “delight” in the law of the Lord. They take delight in living as God would have them live. They take delight in doing unto others as God would have them do.

Through righteous behavior toward others, they become “like a tree planted by the rivers of water,” a tree that brings forth fruit, a tree “that shall not wither.”

#### *Comment 7*

In contrast, we’re told that the fig tree by which Jesus and the disciples have passed is a tree that has withered. It has withered from the roots up.

In other words, the fig tree is like those people who have failed to take “delight” in truly living as God would have them live.

The scene that we find in Mark seems to be suggesting that no matter how deep the “roots” of an unrighteous people might sink, they will fail to reach the life-imparting “rivers of water” that flow so freely from God’s holy throne. In the days of Jeremiah, a Jerusalem that had failed to uphold God’s righteous ways fell to Babylonian invaders. In the same way, suggests the Gospel of Mark, echoing both Psalm 1 and the book of Jeremiah, every “tree” that finds no water will surely fail, will surely fall.

### *For Discussion*

What lessons should we take from this for ourselves?

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:21

#### *For Discussion*

Given the context, what kinds of things might Peter be “remembering”?

#### *Comment 8*

Mark never says what it is that Peter “remembered.” The meaning is left obscure. But obviously, anything that is “remembered” has gone before.

It’s possible, then, that Peter is remembering a host of things. Perhaps he is remembering Jesus’ previous observation that the fig tree was bearing “no fruit.” In that case, his remembering is perhaps also mingled with a remembering of Psalm 1. That kind of intertwined remembering could serve as a reminder that when we as God’s people fail to “bear fruit,” we are failing to live as God intends. As a people, we are no longer a tree “planted by the rivers of water.” We are no longer sustained by the spring that flows from God’s own throne.

#### *Comment 9*

It’s also possible, however, that Peter is remembering the dramatic actions that Jesus took in the temple—and the incredible words which Jesus quoted from Isaiah and Jeremiah.

In light of what’s happened to the tree, this kind of “remembering” might serve as a stark recognition that a time of cleansing and renewal—much like the cleansing and renewal that occurred during the exile—is once again about to occur.

#### *Comment 10*

Just as the prophet Jeremiah pronounced a tumultuous end to the injustice and violence that had come to Jerusalem, perhaps through his words and through his deeds, Jesus is suggesting that something similar is about to occur.

Jeremiah urged the people of his day to accept the fall of Jerusalem. He urged them to accept it and not fight against it as it was the will of the Lord.

In his “remembering,” Peter is perhaps now wondering if Jesus is suggesting something similar.

### *Comment 11*

All of this “remembering” would have been especially relevant for early readers of Mark.

Many scholars believe that Mark was written between the years 66 and 70, the very time when certain Jews rose up in a violent revolt against Rome. As a result of that revolt, the temple—and all of Jerusalem—was in severe jeopardy, just as they had been back in Jeremiah’s day when the powerful Babylonian army approached Jerusalem.

The prophet Jeremiah told the people of Jerusalem to quit resisting the Babylonian advance for they as a people had failed to “bear fruit.” He told them that their roots were no longer sustained by “rivers of water.” He told them that their “tree” would wither—and that their “house” would fall.

### *Comment 12*

In like manner, the Gospel of Mark seems to be suggesting that those who seek to be faithful should not waste their time trying to defend Jerusalem in the face of Roman oppression. Just as in Jeremiah’s day, the wayward “house of the Lord” was in need of cleansing, was in need of renewal. Its “roots” had withered. Its “fruit” had failed.

By the year 70, both Jerusalem and the glorious temple to which Jesus and the disciples had come were in utter ruins, burned and destroyed by rampaging Roman soldiers. The time of cleansing and renewal had begun.

### *For Discussion*

Should we view every tragedy as a hopeful time of cleansing and renewal? Why or why not? Are some tragedies just tragedies? Why or why not?

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:21

### *Comment 13*

Mark often seems to insert certain words into his text as clues to biblical connections and interpretations. Because we don’t know the Jewish scriptures as well as his first-century readers, we sometimes miss these clues and allusions. But one of these allu-

sions is perhaps found in the words of Peter where he turns to Jesus and says, “Master, the fig tree which you cursed, it is withered away!”

From the scene as it was described earlier in Mark, we know that Jesus never “cursed” the fig tree in any literal way. His words seem to reflect more sadness than anger. Yet when Peter remembers what happened, we find him describing the tree as being “cursed” by Jesus.

The inclusion of the word “cursed” might be a deliberate effort by Mark to direct our minds to the book of Malachi, where the same word occurs in relation to the temple and its abuse of the poor.

### *Scripture to Read*

Malachi 3:8–9, 1–3

### *Comment 14*

In Malachi’s day, it wasn’t the average people who were “robbing God.” As verse 3 explains, it was the “sons of Levi.” The priests and leading officials of the temple were “robbing God” by keeping the tithes and food offerings of the people for themselves.

According to the prophet, God wanted the *whole* of the tithes and offerings put into the “storehouse” so that there would be food for all of God’s people, especially those who were poor and in need.

### *Comment 15*

In Malachi’s day—as in Jesus’ day—the “temple” wasn’t just a “religious” place. It was the center of society. It brought together a multitude of spiritual, economic, and political dimensions. The “tithes” of Malachi’s day were the equivalent of today’s taxes, resources that God wanted to be used for the benefit of all, not just as play things for the rich.

The prophet Malachi declares that the temple, which represents the “whole nation,” is “cursed with a curse” for it is “robbing God” by failing to meet the needs of the poor.

### *Comment 16*

So when Mark shows us Peter describing the tree that is “withered” as a tree that is “cursed,” Mark is

perhaps suggesting that Jesus—like so many prophets before him—has made clear through his words and his deeds that God’s anger is still aroused by any “house” that fails to be “a house of prayer for *all* people.” God’s anger is still aroused by any society that becomes a “den of thieves” by taking that which is meant to serve as a blessing for all and using it solely for the benefit of a few.

Jesus seems to have recognized that year after year, generation after generation, God’s people have failed to “delight” in God’s ways. But when our roots fail to tap into the “rivers of waters,” we become like a “tree” that is cursed, a tree that is “withered,” a tree from which all those who so desperately need to “eat” can eat no more.

### *For Discussion*

In what ways, if any, are we as God’s people “bearing fruit” as we ought? And in what ways, if any, are we too “robbing God”?

Are there any ways in which all of this should affect our evaluation of political candidates?

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:22

### *Comment 17*

We’re told that Peter “remembers.” He begins to see ways in which Jesus’ words and deeds connect to some very scary and challenging passages of scripture. From Mark’s description, we can almost imagine Peter’s eyes opening wide. We can almost imagine his hands trembling. A prized tree is withering. A precious city is falling. A hard and painful time of cleansing and renewal seems to be on the horizon. For any of us, that would be frightening indeed.

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus responds not just to Peter but to the whole of his followers. Jesus’ answer is not just to Peter but to “them.”

At first glance, however, Jesus’ words in response seem glib. “Have faith in God,” he says. “Have faith in God.”

### *For Discussion*

When is it easiest to “have faith in God”—and when hardest?

What could Jesus possibly mean by responding this way to the deep anguish that comes when a “tree” withers and a city falls and a way of life seems to be destroyed?

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 31:3–4, 10–11

### *Comment 18*

The book of Jeremiah is primarily about “trees” that are withering—and about a selfish people who are failing to uphold the gracious ways of the Lord. As a result, says the prophet, the Lord is getting ready to uproot and tear down. A city will fall. A nation will be carried off into exile.

And yet, according to the book of Jeremiah, this same God is a God in whom we can trust, a God in whom we can have faith, for this God who judges is simultaneously a God who loves with “an everlasting love.”

### *Comment 19*

Yes, says Jesus, a great “fall” is coming. Trees are failing. Roots are withering. As in the days of Jeremiah, those who have behaved like a “den of thieves” will soon find themselves scattered.

It may seem like a paradox, says Jesus, but “have faith in God,” for the God who scatters is likewise the God who gathers. “Have faith in God,” says Jesus, for just as in Jeremiah’s day, the God who tears down will be seen in the end as the God who keeps, the God who redeems, the God who steadfastly ransoms even those who have fallen—by their own unrighteous misbehavior—into the cruel hands of others.

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 31:7–9

### *Comment 20*

The book of Jeremiah covers a very long period of time, and because it spans multiple generations,

it's widely thought to have been written by more than one person.

This particular passage provides a joyful perspective not on the fall of Jerusalem but on the return of God's people to Mount Zion after many decades of exile in Babylon.

#### *Comment 21*

"Sing for joy!" declares God through the delivered word of a divinely appointed messenger. "Those who have been weeping will be gathered. I will bring you together from wherever you have been scattered: from the north and the south, from the east and the west. And I will bring not just the strong but the weak and the lame, the blind and the pregnant—a great company shall return as *one* people, as *my* people."

"I will be your father," says the Lord. "And I will be your mother. I will treat the whole of you as my 'firstborn.' No more will you stumble. No more will you wither, for I will lead you. And I will cause you to walk in those godly ways that are fed by 'the rivers of waters,' the same 'rivers of waters' of which Psalm 1 speaks, the same 'rivers of waters' that cause 'trees' to flourish and bear fruit, fruit that will never fail, fruit that will never fade."

#### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:22–23

#### *For Discussion*

Who do you think Jesus is talking about here when he talks about saying to a mountain, "Move, mountain!" and the mountain moves? What might these references to a "mountain" moving have to do with the larger context? What connection, if any, might there be between Jesus' words about the mountain and Jesus' preceding words about having "faith in God"?

#### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 4:26, 24, 27, 14

#### *Comment 22*

In the book of Jeremiah, God pleads with the

people of Jerusalem to "wash their hearts." God pleads with them to cleanse away their "wickedness" so that they might be "saved" and so that the land need not be made "desolate."

But because they are confident in their own selves—and because they think that they've got God safely trapped in their own hands—they refuse to change their ways of living.

#### *Comment 23*

As a result, trees wither. Those places that were once seen as "fruitful" become little more than a vacant patch of dried-up "wilderness."

The prophet looks around. His eyes pop open. He sees "hills" beginning to move. He sees "mountains" beginning to tremble. It's as if all of creation is hearing and responding to God's voice—except the supposedly holy people of Jerusalem. All of creation is hearing and responding to God's voice—except those arrogant, self-confident people of God who are foolishly still listening to themselves rather than to their Maker.

#### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:22–23

#### *Comment 24*

It's clear that Mark wants us to connect the statements in these two verses. The statement about having "faith in God" is immediately followed by the words "for verily I say unto you."

In other words, because of the way in which Mark has structured this account, it's clear that the *reason* that we are to have "faith in God" is *because* there is One to whom even the mountains of this world listen. The God in who we are to "have faith" is the very One who can say to a mountain, "Mountain, move," and the mountain will obediently jump into the sea.

#### *Comment 25*

In Jeremiah's day, the people of Jerusalem thought of themselves as holy. After all, they had "the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord." But they weren't willing to lis-

ten. And they certainly weren't willing to obey. The same was true of far too many people in Jesus' day. They had *faith in themselves* rather than "faith in God."

As trees wither and cities fall, says Jesus, you may not know where to turn. But "have faith in God." Align yourselves the One who can cause hills to move and mountains to tremble. Align yourselves with the One whose word—from the very beginning—has had the power to make all things new.

### *For Discussion*

Do you think that these words about the mountains moving means that if we as human beings truly believe and never doubt, we can too can order the mountains around? That we too can make the mountains do what we want them to do? Why or why not?

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:24–25

### *Comment 26*

The opening word of verse 24 is "therefore." It's a clue that what we find in these two verses is inherently linked to what has gone before.

To "have faith in God" is to align ourselves with the One whose word is mighty, whose word is powerful, whose word can cause even mountains to move and hills to tremble.

### *Comment 27*

"Therefore," says the Gospel of Mark, when we have aligned ourselves with this Mighty One, we can pray, knowing that our deepest desires will be fulfilled. Yes, we can pray, knowing that those humble cries that reflect God's own mountain-moving word will always be heard.

What are these deepest desires, desires shaped by God's own heart? If Mark 11:25 is any clue, they are in some fundamental sense the desires of forgiveness.

### *Comment 28*

Like those in Jeremiah's day who were scattered

into a wilderness of their own making, like those in Jeremiah's day who endured decade after decade of captivity and exile, we yearn for cleansing. We yearn for restoration and renewal.

We yearn to be restored to relationship with the "gathering" One. It's the One whose deepest thoughts—according to Jeremiah—are always of peace and never of evil.

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 29:10–14

### *Comment 29*

Jeremiah suggests that when we search for God with "all" our heart, then we are giving ourselves over wholly to God's will and to God's ways. There's no longer any part of us that is still trying to do our own thing, still trying to go our own way.

When we search for God with our whole selves, setting aside our own selfish agendas, then the God of forgiveness will truly find us, will truly gather us, will truly restore us.

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:25

*Note: We're not reading verse 26 because it is not actually included in the oldest, most reliable texts of Mark. That's why most newer translations of scripture either omit it or include it only in a footnote.*

### *Comment 30*

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says that when we pray, having aligned our deepest desires with God's desires, then whatsoever we ask, we will receive. In like manner, the book of Jeremiah says that when we seek God with every corner of our heart, then God will find us and hear our cry.

Because God is a forgiving God, to align our desires with God's desires and to align our ways with God's ways means that we too must be a forgiving people.

### *Comment 31*

If we stand praying, says the Gospel of Mark, but have a grudge against someone else, then we have

not truly aligned ourselves with God and God's ways. So we can't then truly expect to receive the deepest desire of our own heart, which is the desire for forgiveness.

A forgiving God hears the prayers of a forgiving people. Forgiving others for whatever they've done and for whatever they might "owe" us restores our relationship with those who have done us wrong. And it likewise allows us to be restored to a relationship with the One whose love is everlasting, the One who always desires to gather rather than to scatter.

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 33:1–3

### *Comment 32*

In this portion of Jeremiah, the prophet has delivered a word from the Lord that the people of Jerusalem didn't want to hear. Now he's been thrown into jail. He's "shut up in the court of the prison," as the King James Version puts it.

Then the Maker of all that is, the Lord whose mighty word formed the earth and established it, this very Lord comes to Jeremiah and says, "Call unto me, and I will answer. Call unto me with the fullness of your heart, and I will show you great and mighty things, things which you as yet know not, gracious and loving things which go beyond your imagining."

### *Comment 33*

Jeremiah is in prison. He's been "shut up"—and locked down. His own people have turned against him. If Jeremiah is anything like us, he's bound to be resentful. He's bound to be nurturing some grudges in the hidden corners of his heart.

Based on the words of Jesus in Mark, to call upon God, to seek those great and mighty things that go beyond Jeremiah's own imagining, Jeremiah will need to set aside his grudges. To feel the embrace of a forgiving God, Jeremiah will need to extend forgiveness—even to those who have done him the deepest of wrongs.

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 33:4, 6–11

### *Comment 34*

In a sense, the imprisonment of Jeremiah serves as a forerunner to the "cleansing" captivity of the people of Judah. In this "cleansing," Judah is healed. Judah is "cured." The hidden grudges are stripped away. An "abundance of peace and truth" is revealed.

### *Comment 35*

Because they are finally able to seek God with *all* their heart, because they are finally able to align their desires with God's own deepest desires, God cleanses them "from all their iniquity."

They are pardoned and forgiven, even though they have done great wrong. Jerusalem—the "tree" that withered and the city that was made "desolate"—this city becomes the "voice of joy and the voice of gladness," for it has once again aligned itself with the One whose "mercy endureth forever."

### *Comment 36*

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus first goes to the temple—and finds it empty. When he returns, he finds it filled with people pursuing their own agenda, seeking their own gain. They're like a withered tree that has forgotten the One whose word can move hills and cause great mountains to tremble. They bear no fruit, for their roots no longer reach the "rivers of waters" that flow from God's throne.

But for all who are withered—and for all who are desolate—both Jesus and Jeremiah foresee a day when "the house of the Lord" and the people that are called by God's name will reconnect with God's mercy. Through their own forgiving ways, they shall once again truly lift up through both their words and their deeds "the sacrifice of praise in the house of the Lord."

### *Comment 37*

In *that* day, says Jesus—and in *that* day, says Jeremiah—Mount Zion shall bring "honor" to God on behalf of "all the nations of the earth." The house

of God shall once again be a “house of prayer for *all* people” and not just a “den of thieves.”

In the early 1870s an economic collapse in the United States caused banks to fail and the financial system to tremble. People who had built their wealth on fraud and illusion found their “tree” withered and their “mountain” fallen.

During that time of economic collapse, a man named Erastus Johnson wrote a hymn that reflects some of the spirit that is found in both Mark and Jeremiah. The first verse of that hymn includes these words:

*O sometimes the shadows are deep,  
and rough seems the path to the goal,  
and sorrows, sometimes how they sweep  
like tempests down over the soul.  
O then to the Rock let me fly,  
to the Rock that is higher than I.  
O then to the Rock let me fly,  
to the Rock that is higher than I!*

# Jerusalem!



A look at the Gospel of Mark's description of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem with special attention to related passages from the book of Jeremiah

## SESSION 5: Mark 11:27—12:12

# *Don't want no trouble at the river...*

### *Comment 1*

In Jesus' day—as in Jeremiah's day—the temple in Jerusalem was not just a physical structure. Rather, it was a visible representation of a relationship, a relationship between God and God's people.

In many ways, then, the temple in Jerusalem functioned—both in Jesus' day and in Jeremiah's day—as a symbol of the “covenant” or mutual agreement that God and God's people had made with one another.

### *Comment 2*

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus heads to Jerusalem. The temple seems to be his focus. But Jesus is focused on the temple not just as a place but as a visible representation of what was to be a thriving relationship between God and God's people.

It was a relationship that was to manifest itself in an abundance of forgiveness and love. It was a relationship in which God would provide “rivers of waters” and God's people, drawing on those waters, would provide a rich harvest of “fruit,” a rich harvest of deeds modeled on God's own values and God's own character.

### *Comment 3*

Mark describes Jesus and the disciples walking into Jerusalem. On their way, they pass a fig tree. As the disciples watch, Jesus goes up to the tree and

sees that there are no figs. For Jesus, the fig tree is a stand-in for the covenant between God and God's people. The tree has plenty of leaves—but no fruit.

For all who read Mark, the tree is a kind of “object lesson.” The leaves that grow from its branches are sign that its roots have water from which they can draw. In other words, God has kept God's side of the covenant. God has provided the “rivers of waters” that are needed if a tree—or a people—is to bear fruit. But there's no fruit on the tree, no fruit on the people.

### *Comment 4*

The prophet Jeremiah confronted a similar situation. In the book of Jeremiah, the leaders of Jerusalem have to be reminded that it wasn't God who had failed. It wasn't God who had put the city in danger.

Rather, the failure lay in the hands of those with whom God had entered into relationship. They had not kept their end of the bargain, their end of the agreement, their end of the covenant. They had chosen violence and injustice, death and destruction. The “fruit” of their choice, declared Jeremiah, would be more of the same, and that was sad indeed.

### *Comment 5*

In Mark, after pointing out the lack of “fruit” on

the fig tree, Jesus goes to the temple, the outward symbol of the covenant. He casts aside the seats of dove sellers who are profiting from the miseries faced by women and the poor.

He turns over the tables of the money changers who are profiting from the burdens that the temple has placed on foreigners and Gentiles. He expels those who have been busy driving the weak even further into debt. Finally, he blocks the path of the rich, who have proudly been parading through the temple with lavish displays of their wealth.

### *Comment 6*

Through each of his actions, it's as if Jesus is demonstrating that although the leaves are still on the "tree," the "tree" is not bearing fruit. The covenant has been subverted—not by anything that God has done but by the failure of God's people to fulfill their end of the bargain.

The next day, as Jesus and the disciples return to Jerusalem, Peter notices a fig tree. This time the tree has lost its leaves as well. We're told that it has withered from the roots up. In other words, because the "tree" hadn't born fruit, the "rivers of waters" have been taken away. When God's people fail to uphold their end of the covenant, why should God keep supplying the "rivers of waters" that God had promised to provide?

### *Comment 7*

It's the same message that was brought to the leaders of the people in the days of Jeremiah. In Jeremiah's day, the withdrawal of the "rivers of waters" lead to the destruction of the city, even the destruction of the temple.

When the Gospel of Mark was written, something similar was about to happen to Jerusalem. The city and its temple would soon be destroyed by Roman soldiers.

### *Comment 8*

As the disciples begin to grasp the lesson that Jesus has conveyed through his interaction with the fig tree, they tremble, for the implications are overwhelming. Those things in which they had trusted

would soon be no more.

"Have faith in *God*," Jesus tells them. Cities can fall. Temples can crumble. Human beings can fail to deliver the "fruit" that they have promised. But there is still a God whose word can move mountains, whose word can bring new worlds—and even new "covenants"—into being.

### *Comment 9*

So when you stand praying, says Jesus to his disciples, put your faith in the God who never fails. Stay true to the One who freely forgives. Align your desires with the desires of the One who can restore your hope and cleanse your heart.

But as you stand praying, says Jesus, remember that if God is to be faithful, then you, too, must be faithful. A covenant is a mutual commitment. There's "fruit" to be delivered, and that "fruit" begins with forgiveness. Forgiving any and all who have done you wrong, suggests Jesus, is what allows the "tree" to flower. It's what allows the fruit to come.

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 1:4

### *For Discussion*

A "word" can't come literally knocking on someone's door. So in what kinds of ways might this "word" have come to Jeremiah?

In what ways, if any, might a similar "word" come to us today?

### *Comment 10*

A "word" comes to Jeremiah. It's the "word of the Lord," a word of great power, a word that can cause mountains to move and hills to tremble, a word that brings forth new worlds and new hopes, a word that forms and shapes, a word that moves "over the waters" and calls forth that which God wants to be.

In Hebrew, the language in which Jeremiah was written, a "word" is not just something that is spoken. It's something alive and powerful. That's why it "comes" to Jeremiah. It's a spoken word and an

active deed. It's a force that's alive. It's a presence that's strong. And this "word" in its wholeness—this "word" in its tremendous mountain-moving power—it comes to Jeremiah.

*Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 1:4–5

*Comment 11*

This "word of the Lord" that comes to Jeremiah is a word that mothers, a word that gives birth, a word that calls forth a child. This child is called forth by an active, ever-moving "word," a "word" that is holy, a "word" that "ordains" this child to be "a prophet unto the nations."

This child who has come forth from the womb of God is to be a messenger not just to a single people but to multiple "nations" of the world, for the "word" that has brought him forth is a "word" that is active and alive in *every* nation, working with power in *all* the world.

*Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 1:6

*Comment 12*

Jeremiah doesn't want his assignment, doesn't want his task. "Oh, no, Lord," he says. "Not me. I'm only a child..."

The book of Jeremiah wasn't just thrown together. It was carefully prepared and creatively polished. So it often speaks with great power. Here in Jeremiah's response, the text speaks with irony. We see Jeremiah resisting. He says that he can't serve as God's prophet, for he's only "a child."

This response is almost comical, for as we've already learned, Jeremiah is a "child of God." He's been formed in God's own womb. He's been brought forth by God's own "word." Yes, he's a "child"—the perfect child for this task.

*For Discussion*

If Jeremiah had been so perfectly prepared for his task, why does he resist it?

Why do people today resist God's calling? Can

you think of any times that you yourself resisted the very task for which God had prepared you?

*Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 1:7–10

*Comment 13*

The text indicates that Jeremiah is endowed with "authority." He goes to Jerusalem not of his own volition but because he has been "sent." He speaks not words of his own choosing but words that he has been "commanded" to speak.

According to verse 9, Jeremiah has been "touched" by God. As a result of that "touching," his words and deeds are to be seen by all as the words and deeds of the Holy One.

*Scripture to Read*

Isaiah 6:1, 5–7

*Comment 14*

A similar "touching" occurs early in the book of Isaiah. In a vision, the prophet is lifted up into the presence of God. He is about to be commissioned as a prophet, but he trembles, for he knows that he is a person of "unclean lips." That which comes from his mouth is not yet perfectly in keeping with "the word of the Lord."

*Comment 15*

In Isaiah's vision, one of the winged creatures swirling around the throne of God swoops down and "touches" the mouth of the prophet. Isaiah's mouth is "touched" with a burning ember from the heavenly altar.

We're told that through that "touch," the prophet's iniquity is taken away. The "uncleanness" of his lips is removed. His mouth is purified, as it were, so that he will be able to deliver the true and authoritative "word of the Lord."

*Comment 16*

A twentieth-century gospel song includes these words:

*Oh, he touched me; oh, he touched me;  
and, oh what a joy that floods my soul!  
Something happened and now I know:  
he touched me and made me whole.*

A different and yet remarkably similar “touching” comes to both Isaiah and Jeremiah. Through a holy touch, their “iniquity” is taken away. Their “brokenness” is made whole. Their “words” become “wholly” consistent with “the word of the Lord.” And so the “touching” that comes to Jeremiah is a “touching” that endows his words and his deeds with a kind of divine authority.

### ***Scripture to Read***

Jeremiah 1:10

### ***Comment 17***

Jeremiah’s commission encompasses six tasks. According to verse 10, the first four tasks are rather mind-boggling. Jeremiah is to “root out,” “pull down,” “destroy,” and “throw down.” Deeds of this nature could surely cause others to question his “authority.” But Jeremiah is to press ahead. He is to “be not afraid of their faces.”

Jeremiah is to press ahead for in God’s mind, there’s a withered and fruitless “tree” that needs to be “rooted out.” There’s a dried-up, good-for-nothing vine that needs to be “pulled up” and “tossed aside.”

### ***Comment 18***

After this old withered “tree” has been cast aside, Jeremiah is to fulfill two very different tasks. He is to “build,” and he is to “plant.”

In other words, the time will come when God will be ready to start anew. When the garden has been cleansed, when withered trees have been “plucked up” and “thrown down,” the “word of the Lord” will once again flow like “rivers of waters.” It will once again become a word of creation, a word of restoration and renewal, a word of forgiveness and deliverance. Jeremiah is to share in these tasks as well.

### ***Scripture to Read***

Mark 11:27–28

### ***Comment 19***

The Gospel of Mark portrays the mission of Jesus as remarkably similar to the mission of Jeremiah. And so the ever-active, mountain-moving “word of the Lord” that comes forth from Jesus evokes questions in Jerusalem that are remarkably similar to those faced by Jeremiah.

“By what authority are you doing these things?” ask the chief priests, the scribes, and the “elders.” They question the legitimacy of the “word” that Jesus *speaks*—and the “word” that Jesus *does*.

### ***Scripture to Read***

Mark 11:29–30

### ***For Discussion***

What possible reasons can you imagine for why Jesus might have responded in this way to the question that was asked?

### ***Comment 20***

The scribes and chief priests and ruling elders in Jerusalem question Jesus. They want to know what “authority” allows him to do what he is doing.

Jesus says that he’ll be glad to tell them if they will first tell him whether the baptism offered by John was divine in origin—or just the idle effort of a misguided man. Tell me that, says Jesus, and I’ll tell you by whose authority I do what I do.

### ***Scripture to Read***

Mark 11:31–32

### ***Comment 21***

As Mark describes the scene, it’s as if the ruling authorities now move into a little huddle near the front of the stage. Jesus remains in the background, quietly waiting for their answer, while we in the “audience” are allowed to listen in on the elders’ frantic whispers.

“If we say that the baptism of John was from God,” says one of the elders, “then Jesus is going to

ask why we didn't believe John when he spoke. So we can't say that."

### *Comment 22*

Another of the elders speaks up. "But if we say that John was only human—that he was just a deluded lunatic—then we're going to make a lot of the common people angry, for a lot of them think that he was a prophet who spoke and did 'the word of the Lord.'"

The scribes and chief priests and ruling elders grind their teeth in disgust. There seem to be only two possible answers: that John spoke with heaven's blessing or that he merely spoke for himself. But for this group of religious and political leaders, neither answer appeals.

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:33

### *Comment 23*

The scribes and chief priests and ruling elders return to Jesus. "Concerning John's work of baptism," they say, "and concerning all that he taught, we can't tell if it was human or divine."

"Well, then," says Jesus, "neither will I tell you by what authority I do what I do."

### *For Discussion*

Do you think Mark wants us to see the response of the religious and political leaders of Jerusalem as evasive or genuine?

If Jesus like Isaiah and Jeremiah has been "touched" in a special way—and if his words like the words of Isaiah and Jeremiah are to be understood as the authoritative "word of the Lord"—then why would Mark show us Jesus refusing to answer the question that was posed to him? What are we supposed to learn from his refusing to answer?

The scribes and chief priests were deeply knowledgeable about the scriptures. They had read and studied sacred texts. Yet it seems that they couldn't tell if either John or Jesus were authentically speaking and doing "the word of the Lord." How then can we in our day authentically judge what is or isn't

"the word of the Lord"?

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 12:1

### *Comment 24*

The parable that Mark is about to give us is not just randomly thrown in here. It's likely that Mark sees this parable as directly related to the discussions—and actions—that have gone before.

The parable begins with a description of someone planting a vineyard. To us, the details might seem incidental, but the chief priests and scribes—as well as early readers of Mark—would have understood these details as a deliberate allusion to a teaching found in the book of Isaiah.

### *Scripture to Read*

Isaiah 5:1b–2

### *Comment 25*

The book of Isaiah offers a vivid teaching in which a vineyard is established on "a very fruitful hill." The owner plants choice vines, builds a watchtower in the midst of it, and then surrounds the vineyard with a protective hedge so that its vines can produce good fruit in abundance. The owner is hoping to produce some great wine.

But instead of producing the kind of grapes for which the vines were intended, what comes forth is "wild grapes." The one who planted the vineyard is shocked. The intended fruit hasn't appeared. What the planter of the vineyard has gotten is "wild grapes." It's *false* fruit rather than *true* fruit. In effect, then, the owner has been robbed. He goes away empty-handed.

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 12:1–3

### *Comment 26*

In Jesus' parable, the owner of the vineyard sends a "servant" to collect a share of the good fruit that the vineyard was prepared to produce. But the tenant farmers—or "husbandmen" as the King James

Version calls them—attack the servant and send him away “empty.” No good fruit is delivered to the owner of the vineyard.

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 12:4–5

### *Comment 27*

The owner of the vineyard keeps sending “servants” to the vineyard. But these “servants” are beaten, wounded, and “shamefully handled.” Some are even killed, and as a result, the owner of the vineyard is again denied the “fruit” that the owner is due, the “fruit” that the owner has been promised.

In scripture, true prophets and agents of God are often referred to as “servants of the Lord.” They are “servants” because they speak and do what God would have them speak and do. Thus, what they speak and do has “authority.” It’s “the word of the Lord.”

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 7:25, 24

### *Comment 28*

Since ancient times, says Jeremiah to the leaders of Jerusalem, God has sent “servants” unto you—prophets who embodied the “word of the Lord.” But you wouldn’t listen. You “hearkened not.” You followed instead the delusions of your “evil hearts.”

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 7:28

### *Comment 29*

Jeremiah tells the leaders of Jerusalem that they are a nation that “obeyeth not the voice of the Lord,” the voice that comes through God’s servants, the prophets. “Truth is perished,” he says, “and is cut off from your mouth.”

In like manner, in the Gospel of Mark, the scribes and chief priests and elders of Jerusalem refuse to acknowledge that John the baptizer *spoke* and *did* “the word of the Lord.” To use the language found in the book of Jeremiah, “truth is perished and cut off

from their mouth.”

As a result, Jesus sees no reason to explain the “authority” by which he does what he does. In his mind, the leaders of Jerusalem have already shown that they are not willing to acknowledge or receive “the word of the Lord.” And they have shown that they are not willing to produce the “fruit” that is due.

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 12:6–9

### *Comment 30*

The parable continues. The owner now sends his son in an effort to collect the share of the fruit that the tenant farmers had promised to provide to the owner.

But the tenant farmers—the very ones who previously refused to acknowledge the authority and legitimacy of the owner’s servants—now wrongly assume that since the owner’s son has come, it must be that the owner has died. They then figure that if they destroy the heir, they will perhaps be able to confiscate the vineyard for themselves. But they have misjudged the situation. The owner lives.

Giving in to their own arrogance and greed, the tenant farmers make a tragic mistake. To use the language of Jeremiah, they have been led astray by “the imagination of their evil heart.”

### *Scripture to Read*

Psalms 118:19, 21–23

### *Comment 31*

Psalms 118 became popular with pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem for major Jewish festivals. As these pilgrims would approach the city, they would cry out for the gates to be opened so that they might enter into the temple and express their praises for God’s salvation.

Included in the psalm is a reference to an old story about how the builders of Solomon’s temple had rejected as “inadequate” one of the stones that had been brought to Jerusalem for use in the construction of the sanctuary. Later, however, accord-

ing to old versions of the story, this same “stone which the builders refused” was seen as having great worth after all. So it was used as one of the chief stones in the corner of the temple porch.

The story perhaps served as a reminder to many Jewish people that even those who seem “worthless” in the eyes of some can play a critically important role in the work of the Lord. With regard to all of this, verse 23 of the psalm declares, “This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvellous in our eyes.”

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 11:27–30

Mark 12:10–11

### *Comment 32*

The scribes and chief priests and elders of Jerusalem have been deluded by the imaginations of their evil hearts. Truth is perished from them. They refuse to acknowledge the servants of the Lord, refuse to welcome those who deliver and do “the word of the Lord.”

So in their bafflement and confusion, they ask Jesus by what “authority” he does what he does.

### *Comment 33*

Drawing from images in Isaiah and Jeremiah, Jesus tells his questioners a rather pointed parable. After telling them the parable, Jesus proceeds to quote from Psalm 118. The words of the psalm become the clear answer that they sought.

By whose “authority” does he do what he does? “It is the Lord’s doing,” Jesus declares, quoting from Psalm 118. “And it is marvellous in our eyes.”

### *Scripture to Read*

Jeremiah 1:9–10, 16, 19

### *Comment 33*

The book of Jeremiah portrays the prophet as initially resisting the call of the Lord, the call of the One who had formed him and shaped him and brought him to birth. He resists, for living and embodying the “word of the Lord” can be frightening indeed.

In Jeremiah’s case—as in Jesus’ case—it involves “rooting out,” “pulling down,” “destroying,” and “plucking up” what the “kingdoms” of this world have wrongly built up. It requires uttering “judgments” against “all wickedness,” and as both Jeremiah and Jesus can affirm, that can evoke the most vehement of reactions.

### *Scripture to Read*

Mark 12:12

### *Comment 34*

The biblical scholars and religious ministers and dominant political leaders of Jerusalem are enraged when Jesus answers their pointed question about whose “word” lies behind his deeds. “It is the Lord’s doing,” he declares, quoting Psalm 118.

They desperately want to “lay hands” on him, but as yet, they don’t know how to do it. “And they left him,” says Mark, “and went their own way.”

### *Comment 35*

Mark perhaps uses the last words of verse 12 as a haunting reminder of the choices that we all face.

Quoting from Psalm 118, Jesus has declared that the way in which he is going is “the Lord’s doing.” But the esteemed leaders of Jerusalem—like so many esteemed religious and political leaders in our own day—are too busy “worshipping the works of their own hands,” to use the language of Jeremiah 1:16. In other words, they aren’t ready to follow. They aren’t ready to produce the good fruit that God expects.

With great sadness, Mark says that the leaders to whom Jesus had been talking “left him and went their own way.”

### *Comment 36*

Implicit in Mark’s description is a question for us all. Whose way will we follow? Whose “word” will we live? Whose “fruit” will we bear? Will it be the “fruit” of forgiveness and mercy? Or the “wild grapes” of selfishness and greed?

An old spiritual with multiple levels of meaning suggests the enduring importance of the answer that we choose to live:

*I don't want  
no trouble at the river.  
I don't want  
no trouble at the river.  
I don't want  
no trouble at the river  
when it's time for me  
to cross to the other side...*