



March 20, 2005
Palm Sunday

Mark 11:12-14
Cursing on Palm Sunday
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According to the Gospel of Mark, when Jesus left Bethany and entered Jerusalem he received the most amazing welcome. Some people cut off branches and spread them on the ground in front of the colt he was riding. Others took off their cloaks and laid them down in front of him. All of the people were shouting "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David. Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Can you imagine what the disciples were thinking? This was a greeting for the long awaited Messiah who had finally come in Jesus Christ. They were thinking that it was time for the kingdom of God. It was time for things to start changing, and for some salvation to start breaking out in the world.

The disciples probably expected Jesus would immediately go the houses of power and take control in order to usher in his new kingdom. But according to Mark, he just enters the city, walks around a bit, looks hard at the temple and then returns to Bethany with the twelve disciples. They had to go to bed that night wondering what that was all about. "Is Jesus the Messiah or not? If he is, what are we doing back here in this ordinary place, Bethany? Why isn't Jesus making the kingdom come in Jerusalem?"

The very next day Jesus leads his disciples back to Jerusalem. Along the way he sees a fig tree with leaves on it. Feeling hungry, he goes over to the tree to see if it has any fruit. Mark makes a point of telling us that it wasn't yet the season for fruit. This event, we know, happened in Pass-over, which means it was sometime in March or April. Fig trees would typically leaf out in March, but not bear fruit until June. This means Jesus is looking for fruit on a tree that was not scheduled to bear fruit, which he had to realize. But seeing no figs, Jesus curses the tree saying, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." A day later the tree was withered away, right down to the roots.

Now I've got to tell you, I have always felt bad for this poor little fig tree. It was just sitting there by the side of the road minding its own business. It wasn't the season for it to have fruit. Isn't Jesus being a little unrealistic? What does he expect of this ordinary tree? The exact same thing he expects of these disciples back in ordinary Bethany, and the exact same thing he expects of us - to bear fruit. Maybe in ordinary places and in ordinary ways, but always to bear fruit.

Throughout Mark's gospel Jesus is constantly telling his disciples to proclaim the Gospel. He tells them to stop hoarding their lives, heal the sick, feed the hungry, become the servant of others, cast the demons out of society, and tell the good news of the forgiveness of sins. Mark depicts Jesus constantly sending the disciples out to this ministry, then they return to Jesus, and then they are sent out again. This is not unlike our own rhythm of worship, mission, worship, mission - all for

the purpose of bearing the fruit of the new kingdom. This is how Jesus has chosen to bring his new kingdom about - not by taking over the houses of power, but by taking over your life.

When the Apostle Paul speaks of this, he calls it the Fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self control. Like the first disciples, our mission is to bear this fruit in the ordinary places Jesus has led our lives. And that is how the world will receive a glimpse of Jesus' new kingdom.

If you are like me, you would never, ever, tell Jesus that bearing the fruit of the Gospel is a bad idea. Instead, we tell Jesus, "I'm going to bear fruit. I'm going to start reading my Bible, praying, and getting very serious about my spirituality. I'm going to care for those who're broken-hearted and whose spirits have been broken by poverty. I'm going to start making a difference with my life and allow it to be used for the new kingdom. I'm going to do all of that ... real soon. It's in the strategic plan. But this is not the right season for me to bear fruit. I've got problems of my own right now. I'm not feeling well. I'm really busy at work. I've got my hands full with these kids. I've got so little money, so little time, how can I give any away?" If you are young, you can object, "I'm just a student, surely I don't have to bear fruit until I graduate. Doesn't Jesus give a student discount?" If you are not young, you can object, "Doesn't Jesus give a senior citizen discount?" There is no shortage of good excuses not to bear fruit. You can be too young or too old, too hurt, too busy, too sick, too exhausted from the last season of fruit bearing.

You may be right. You may indeed have a reasonable, realistic objection for why you should not have to bear the fruit of the kingdom right now. Your excuses can be as realistic as a fig tree that doesn't have figs in March.

When Jesus walks by your life, however, your understanding of reality has to turn upside down. And one of the greatest changes is going to be in your understanding of time. The kingdom of Christ doesn't need your plans about what you are going to do for it. Christ has his own plans. But today his kingdom has broken in to the present asking you to decide if you will bear the fruit of the Gospel today. You don't have tomorrow - Jesus has that. You don't have yesterday - Jesus has that too. All you have is this moment and the critical decision of how you will use it.

The Bible is very clear about this: the future belongs to Jesus Christ. The history of the world, the history of your life, is moving to a future that he alone has written. Read the end of the book, and you will see it all ends gloriously. There is not a thing that you are going to do to make it end any better. Certainly your anxiety about tomorrow is not going to improve it.

The past belongs to Jesus Christ as well. It doesn't matter how long you stare at it, you are never going to improve it. Christ alone can redeem, and will redeem the hurts and failures of your past. Your regrets will do little.

The reason we in the Reformed churches talk about the providence of God is not because we are deterministic. It is to free us from our anxiety about tomorrow and our regret about yesterday so we can concentrate our attention on being faithful today. That is what allows us to bear fruit, even when it isn't a good season for us.

In C.S. Lewis' classic book, *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape who is a high ranking demon in the service of evil, gives advice to Wormwood, a new recruit, on how to hinder the spiritual growth of a new follower of Jesus Christ. In one of Screwtape's epistles, he instructs Wormwood not to tell the follower that he should not do all that is commanded by Christ. "Tell him instead, that there is no hurry. Tell him there is plenty of time." It is the devil's favorite temptation. But there isn't plenty of time. Every time I bury a young person, I am reminded of that. There is just today. And the question of what you will do with it.

Well, how do we do that? How do we concentrate our attention on what Jesus is asking us to do today? The answer is found in the way Mark has written this gospel. He separates Jesus' cursing of the fig tree from the disciples' discovery that it was withered a day later. In between he tells the story of the cleansing of the temple when Jesus did the most unreasonable thing of turning over the tables of the money changers screaming out, "This is supposed to be a house of prayer!"

The leaders of the temple never wanted to make the temple less than a house of prayer. They were planning on getting to prayer, but thought they needed to come up with some new strategic initiatives that would help out the worshipers. For example, the law said you had to give an offering with sacred coins. But most people had Roman coins. So someone spent a lot of time coming up with this plan for exchanging coins. But the tables would eventually turn into a gift shop and then a Temple Savings and Loan if Jesus had not intervened. Meanwhile no one would have been in prayer. The law also said you had to sacrifice animals without blemish. But it was hard on the out-of-towners to bring those animals with them without getting them all blemished up. So a committee of the temple developed a plan to sell animals at the temple. It would be like our putting an ATM machine in the narthex, which has also been suggested. But in the midst of all our realistic, time-consuming plans, Jesus screams out, "You want a plan. How about praying?"

In prayer, we turn our face away from our past and future and toward God. In prayer, our will is conformed to the will of God. And in prayer, we see what is so hard to see - namely, that Jesus Christ is at work bringing his new kingdom into an old world that is dying for its fruit.

Jesus doesn't have to use you to bring about his kingdom. The grace is that he has chosen to. Now you have to make a choice. And every day you have to confront that choice again and again. How will you use this day? Will you spend all of your time focused on the regret of yesterday and the anxiety of tomorrow? Or will you get involved in the work of the kingdom? Will you bear fruit?

Spending our days worrying about the future or the past is a waste of the day. And wasted days are pretty disappointing to Jesus. Apparently, it is enough to make him curse. Amen.