

Palm Sunday

The Fig Tree

Pastor Otis Hall, March 24, 2024

Good morning, Autumn Ridge Church. My name is Otis Hall, one of the pastors here. It's a pleasure to be with you this morning/evening. Would you turn with me in your bible or on your phone to mark chapter 11? If you don't have one of those, please use the bible in the chair back in front of you. Today is a significant day in the life of the church as we commence Holy Week, the culmination of Lent. It's Palm Sunday, and I might be geeking out a little bit about what we are going to talk about this weekend. We are going to learn about this. So that you know, this is not a palm tree. I mean, it is Minnesota; palm trees aren't growing every, especially when it snows in March. This is a fig tree. It is a beautiful example of a fiddle leaf fig tree, to be exact. I might be a little jealous about this fig tree. I'm a bit of a plant enthusiast; an enthusiast might be a bit of an understatement. I am a total plant geek. If you know me, you know I'm the guy on the elephant safari when everyone else is trying to take this picture. Taking pictures of trees like this or this flower like this I love plants. They are beautiful and complex and have so much meaning for me and what we will study today. But the fig tree holds a special secret, a lesson from Jesus Himself, and I can't wait to share it with you.

Today and for the rest of the holy week, I want you to geek out over trees, too. Dr. David Garland, a professor and author, taught us that in the Bible, ***Trees are frequently used as symbols and are portrayed as sensitive to their moral surroundings.***

What we will look at today is one of those cases.

Today, we will see Jesus use a fig tree like this to teach us something. It is something that we already know but something that we might see clearly for the first time.. Have you ever encountered a situation where you saw someone who needed help, but you passed them by, only to regret it later? I have, and it's a feeling that I wouldn't wish upon anyone. Or have you ever avoided having a difficult conversation with your friends, family, or spouse because you were afraid of their reaction, only to wish you had been honest later? I can empathize with that, too, and it's a regret that can linger for a long time. But the truth is that sometimes we keep making the same mistakes over and over again, like we're stuck in a perpetual cycle. It's only when someone points out that we're making poor choices that we're able to see the magnitude of our actions. Israel was also stuck in a similar cycle, making the same decisions repeatedly. Today, we're going to explore this idea by focusing on a fig tree and how it relates to Israel and us

Believe it or not, this fig tree gives us a framework to understand all the things we are going to unfold this week on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Maybe you are here, and you don't know what happened on Palm Sunday. It is the day Jesus, without any formal announcements or elaborate preparations, decided to enter the city riding on the back of a donkey. The crowd was full of people who were excited with their own

expectations of this king. They waved palm branches and laid down their cloaks, creating a path for Jesus. Their cries of, ' Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,' Filled the air.. by the time it was over, it was almost evening. It was too late for evening services, so Jesus showed up, looked around, and left.

Even Jesus is late for church, sometimes.

We are going to focus on what happened in Jesus' life for the 2 days after he entered Jerusalem.

They get up early this time and head back to the city, back to the temple. On the way, he sees a fig tree. Some of you recognize this story about Jesus, right? Matthew and Mark tell it... maybe you have heard it before, and you were like, "This is the strange story," and skipped ahead to the Good Friday.

Well, not today. Today, this is the only thing we are going to talk about.

¹²The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. ¹³Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.

Let me tell you what happens next. Jesus goes to the temple and walks into the court of Gentiles. This wasn't a courtroom place where the judgment was given. It was supposed to be a place where Gentiles who wanted to learn about, give their life to God, and be cared for and taught by those who already knew him. But when Jesus entered, he found something very different.

When he saw that this place was full of people selling doves for sacrifices, money changers exchanging money, and people walking through with their things from the market, Jesus begins turning over tables and running out both buyers and the sellers. He told them that his house would be called a house of prayer for everyone - all nations. But they had made it something else, a den of robbers. He stayed there until evening and then left the city.

²⁰In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. ²¹Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"

This seems way out of character for Jesus. If you have questions about what is happening here and what is going on with Jesus, you are not alone.

Dr. Garland shares some insight about this that I think :

Jesus' demonstration of outrage in the temple and at a fruitless fig tree is unexpected and puzzling. Why this sudden violent outburst? Why this withering curse on what seems to be an innocent fig tree that fails to satisfy his hunger? Why does he vent such anger on an inanimate object that fails to produce fruit out of season?

I bet these are questions that some of you have, or at least questions that I had as I read this story of Jesus' life. These stories in Jesus' life might seem strange, disjointed, and out of sorts with Jesus. Don't worry if this feels incomplete; hang with me. We will finish this later... It doesn't seem to make sense until you realize Mark is trying to give a clue about something important.

Mark uses an interesting storytelling technique called **inclusio**. Biblical writers used this technique to tie things together. It is essentially a fig tree sandwich.

He begins by telling the story of Jesus' interaction with a fig tree, then switches to the temple story and comes back again to conclude the fig tree story. It seems like a mistake, but maybe if you have a little background about Israel and the tree, you will be able to see it in a different light.

Ok hold on this is the plant geek part:

Fig trees play an important role in the lives of those during this time period and today. There are over 900 varieties of fig trees that grow all over the landscape, and they continue to grow today. They come in all shapes and sizes from vines to shrubs to full trees. The fig tree can range from 5ft to 20ft tall and has a complex root structure. The fig is one of the oldest known fruits in the world, and it takes approximately 3-5 years for the tree to start producing fruit. However, when it does, the fig tree is truly remarkable. It is one of the few trees that can simultaneously produce leaves, flowers, and fruits. As the fig tree begins to fill up with leaves, it also produces a fruit called a Paggim that is edible but not as sweet or highly valued as the full fruit. So, this tree, once it starts to produce leaves, always has something edible on it.

The fig tree is prominent in every major religion, including Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism. This tree represents everything from wisdom, security, provision, and blessing to our reaction to judgment.

In the Bible, the tree or its fruit is mentioned 72 times in 66 verses from Genesis to Revelation.

The fig tree plays an immense role in the way Israel sees itself and how others see Israel.

Starting with Genesis. It is one of only 3 trees named in the garden:

- The Tree of Life
- Tree of the knowledge of good and evil
- Fig tree

After the fall, it is the leaves of this tree that Adam and Eve sew their coverings out of:

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

The leaves were sewn together to hide something, and it wasn't the obvious choice. It wasn't really their bodies they wanted to cover. What was being covered up was a change that only God would notice.

It wasn't about their bodies; it was about their shame.

They were covering up their decision to **choose their wisdom over God's wisdom.**

As we will see, Israel had the same problem **choosing their wisdom over God's wisdom.** We understand this, right? When you stand on a stage or with your family and friends and all your truths are laid to bear, what do you do? The easiest response is to cover it up, save face, and make sure you come out looking clean.

This decision plays out over and over again in Israel's life. It is reflected in the fig tree and its fruit 72 times in 66 verses. All these references point to the choice of our wisdom over God's wisdom.

This phrase keeps coming up over and over again:

under their own vine and under their own fig tree

In 1 Kings 4:25 , the tree is about the safety, security, and prosperity provided by the king. 2 Kings 18:31-32 is about the world's pull not to choose God's wisdom but its own. We can be prosperous, safe, and secure living our own way.

Jeremiah calls Israel a fruitless fig tree; Micah (4:4) declares that everyone will sit under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the LORD Almighty has spoken. To only a few chapters (7:1) later compare Israel's lack of faithful people to them failing to find early figs. On and on it goes in the life of Israel.

This is a perpetual cycle that damages them and has a negative effect on the kingdom.

Did you notice that this phrase keeps appearing

under their own vine and under their own fig tree

It is part of the perpetual cycle that damages us and our relationships with others in the kingdom. It is mine, and I control who, what, and how my resources are used.

But God is faithful, consistently reminding them about their connection to him and what happens when they choose his wisdom. He reminds them through Zechariah.

“And I will remove the sin of this land in a single day. In that day each of you will invite your neighbor to sit under your vine and your fig tree.”

God wanted them to be the example not the exception.

God wanted to be their source of safety, security, and peace so that they could participate with Him in the work of the kingdom. Don't we all want that? I mean how you define it might be different than how I define it, but we all want peace in abundance, right?

What I geek out about is how seamlessly and intricately this fig tree is tied to our original issue and the solution. Adam and Eve turn to it when they need something to cover up their shame and insecurities. Israel turns to it for daily provision, but also sees having it as a sign that peace will be theirs. And so, imagine now what is happening when Jesus walks up to this beautiful, large fig tree and pronounces a curse on it. Then he walks into the temple, which is supposed to be the place for all nations to come and have peace and a relationship with God, just like in the garden before the fall, and Jesus calls it all counterfeit.

There are all kinds of practices in place that are for the convenience of the insider. Insiders whom God wanted to be a nation of sent people and sent missionaries. These practices prevented people who desired to have a relationship with God from coming in.

They see all of this, and the next morning, when walking back into the city, Peter notices that the Fig tree has withered—withered from the root. I wonder if he begins to put all these pieces together. Wait, we are like the fig tree? Are we the counterfeit version? We present ourselves as the source of abundance and peace. We even invite people into our version of it, but are we really making room for them? Can you imagine how that must have felt for him...

To be clearer, Peter, Jesus is saying all the things that we have been doing that point to us, make it for us are wrong, because we are supposed to be pointing to God's peace and abundance. ,

This is not a throwaway moment, and it is not an oops moment for Jesus. He was teaching something - playing a parable right before their eyes. And more than that, he was setting himself up as the answer to the problem.

If only Peter had the view that we have that Jesus is the solution to all the counterfeit ways we engage with the kingdom. He is against all counterfeit things, including counterfeit religion and business, which stand in the way of us truly experiencing God and rob us of the peace and abundance needed to help others experience the true nature of him. If Peter could only have seen, could only have known at this moment how committed Jesus is to help us be free from these counterfeit things that stand in the way of a true relationship with Jesus.

Yet even with all the knowledge of the tree and what it means to Israel and all the visuals of what has happened to Israel in the past and in the temple, he won't fully understand it until Jesus is gone. Until Jesus lays down his life for us. That Jesus is made himself the answer. They won't understand that Jesus is replacing the false Eden with himself until after his resurrection. They won't understand that they are playing it out all over again: "having your own fig tree." But Jesus is saying, instead of your own fig tree or vine, abide in him. Jesus turns it around and becomes the answer.

But you know what? Jesus knows that. Jesus' answer to Peter's statement is a simple declaration of truth: **Have faith in God.**

Because at some point, the temptation to turn back will come. For Peter, it came a few days later when he denied Jesus three times. But what about us? I can think of all the ways I make my agenda more important than Jesus' agenda. Can you think of ways that we might slip back into our counterfeit ways? I mean, it is easy to want to sit under our own tree and have a kingdom that reflects my version of perfection. But that ideal in my head is counterfeit. It replaces Jesus' agenda with my own. Today, we are reminded that that will end up fruitless and dead. We don't want our lives or our church to be a fruitless. We want it to be a victory for Jesus. So, let's be people who abide in Jesus, who delight in Jesus, and who help other people delight in him. This is why we practice Gospel Fluency: to know what the gospel is. This is why we partner with Next Chapter, whose mission is to build lasting relationships with people who are impacted by the cycle of incarceration, restoring them to God and family or Celebrate recovery that creates safe places for us to face our hurts, habits, and hang-ups to break the cycle of them impacting ourselves and our relationship with others. Because it is easy to fall into the trap of counterfeit religion, counterfeit business, and counterfeit relationships. Let's do what Jesus says to do, have faith in God, and Pray.

As we close today, I want to close with a prayer from Martin Luther King Jr.. Would you pray with me?