

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(November 20, 2011)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: BREATHLESS

(studies in the Gospel of Mark)

Lessons from a Fruitless Fig Tree

(Mark 11:11-14, 19-25)

Study #24

Introduction: The Bible is...

“When I read the Bible, I feel _____.”

How would you complete that sentence?

Like most books, the Bible leaves its mark on us. It makes an impact on us.

I am a reader. Not everyone enjoys reading, but I do. I enjoy what the written words on a page do to me. So, I'll pick up a Tom Clancey novel and get excited by the action. Or I'll get lost in a C.S. Lewis or J.R.R. Tolkien or J.K. Rowling fantasy.

History captivates. Biography inspires. Sports stories fascinate. Politics informs. Theology clarifies. Current events either demoralize or galvanize.

The Bible does all of that and more. There are times when I love the Bible because it instructs and leads me into Jesus' abundant life. Other times I love it because it comforts or convicts me.

Sometimes I put down the Bible after reading it and feel warmed, other times loved, and other times rebuked.

After reading and re-reading the passage in front of us this morning I have felt, unusually, off-balance.

For most of this week I haven't been quite sure what I should do with Mark 11:11-25. In fact, over the last several days there have been times when I've wished I wasn't so committed to an expository pulpit ministry ('cuz if I wasn't I'd be tempted to skip these verses!).

Mark describes actions Jesus takes and records words Jesus spoke that are, at least to me, befuddling.

But, believing that *“all Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness”* (2 Timothy 3:16), we'll tackle what has been, at least for me, a pretty challenging collection of verses.

We'll ease into our passage for today by remembering where we have come from.

Reviewing the triumphal entry...

Last Sunday we watched Jesus orchestrate the details of His final entry into Jerusalem. Everything had to be “just so.” On this one spring afternoon, He would be recognized for the Messiah He was.

Out of all the Gospels, Mark tells the tale with the fewest details.

For instance, when Matthew records the Triumphal Entry, he lets us know that the whole city was stirred up. (Matthew 21:10) In Luke's gospel, we hear Jesus say that if the people had not cried out in praise and worship, the stones would have. (Luke 19:40)

Mark includes none of that. He just gives us the bare facts of Jesus' approach to Jerusalem. The excitement is unmistakable, but there is no fluff to Mark's story-telling.

And after being hailed Messiah and King, Jesus arrived at His destination. His actual entrance is among the most anti-climactic events in the Bible.

Recon Jesus...

[11] Jesus entered Jerusalem and came into the temple; and after looking around at everything, He left for Bethany with the twelve, since it was already late.

From crowds to isolation

Having been accompanied by adoring crowds on the road, it seems that He walked through the gates leading into the city alone. The crowds have disappeared.

He and His disciples (we can assume that they, at least, went with Him) walked from the Golden Gate to Herod's massive temple without anyone shouting, "*Hosanna!*" Nobody called out, "***Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord!***"

And we know full well what Jesus would have seen upon His arrival at the temple.

What met His eyes

He likely didn't move all the way into the inner courts.¹ He probably just stayed in the expansive outside periphery, hanging around in the Court of the Gentiles.

Standing there, He would have seen animals being bought and sold in the Court of the Gentiles. He would have seen money being exchanged in the same place.

He took it all in. He didn't miss anything. Every detail, from the exorbitant price tags on the animals to the ridiculously high exchange rate on currency, caught His attention.

We wonder, too, if He also saw Gentiles scattered among the crowds, bewildered at the lack of quiet space for worship. Did He witness people who were far from God, who were to have had this one sacred place to seek the Lord, not finding a place to seek Him?

He looked around and He saw it all.

When you have gone to a famous place of interest, be it the Grand Canyon or The Alamo, the Eiffel Tower or the State Fair of Texas, you look around. We look around with mouths open, taking in the sights, enjoying the scenery.

Jesus looked around while He was in the temple in Jerusalem. But it wasn't in a touristy way. Jesus' "looking around" was more of a soldierly thing. He was doing reconnaissance, planning His next move.

This visit to the temple gave Jesus the chance to see for Himself exactly what was going on. And it gave Him a chance to plan what He would do when He next came to the temple, which would be on the next day.

We now know that whatever happens on that day won't be Jesus acting impulsively. He knows exactly what He is walking into and He knows exactly what He is going to do.

Back to Bethany

By the time He had gotten an eyeful of the Temple's sham it was time to go. He and the twelve reversed course late in the afternoon and left the way they had arrived.

They headed out of the Court of the Gentiles, walked back through the Golden Gate down into the Kidron Valley back up the Mount of Olives and over to Bethany to spend the night, as was their habit, with their good friends, Lazarus and Mary and Martha.

The action resumes on the following day as Jesus and His crew left Bethany and headed back toward Jerusalem.

¹ The word used here for the "temple" refers to the physical structure and not to the spiritual dwelling place of God (*hieros*, not *naos*).

A Miracle of Destruction (vv. 12-14)

Hungry on the Road (v. 12)

[12] On the next day, when they had left Bethany, He became hungry.

While hiking into Jerusalem, Jesus got hungry. We all know what it is to get hungry during daily activities. So did Jesus. He wasn't running a marathon and He wasn't on a really long hike. But it had been some time since Martha fixed His breakfast and He's looking for fast food.

Not seeing a Wendy's or even a Valero Corner Store, He did spy the next best thing - a promising fig tree not far away!

A Promising (but barren) Fig Tree (v. 13)

[13] Seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.

Vain pursuit of a snack

I don't have a lot of experience with figs, personally (not a big fig fan). But from what I hear, figs are good eating. In the Middle East the fruit of the fig tree is a staple of people's diet.

Jesus walked up to this fig tree and saw that it had leaves, indicating that it was a healthy tree AND that it should have had, not ripe figs, but an early fruit called *paggim*, tiny pre-fig "figlets" about the size of a cherry. The *paggim* develop in the spring, before the actual fig crop comes on in early summer. But this fig tree had only leaves, no fruit at all.

"It was not the season for figs."

Jesus was not expecting to find mature figs on the tree at the Passover season. As Mark tells us, ***"it was not the season for figs."***²

² Fig harvest is roughly mid-August to mid-October.

But it was the season for *paggim* (the early fruit). And this tree, despite having the leaves that would normally indicate the presence of some fruit, not only does not have mature figs, it has no *paggim* either. It had the signs of fruit, but no fruit.

Jesus had hoped to find some refreshment from the tree. He was hungry and wanted a snack. But the tree had no fruit. So, He spoke to the disappointing fig tree as only the Creator can.

The Fig Tree that Never Saw it Coming (v. 14)

[14] He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" And His disciples were listening.

Not surprisingly, this - the cursing of the fig tree - has prompted predictable reactions from friends and critics alike. This is the last miraculous action performed by Jesus recorded by Mark, and it has always been a problem for preachers (including this one).

When Mark tells us ***"it was not the season for figs"*** we think that this should exonerate the tree from any guilt at not having fruit and should protect it from Jesus' cursing.³

But not finding fruit of any kind, not finding even the early cherry-sized fruit, led Jesus to perform His one and only miracle of destruction.

We have seen Jesus perform other nature miracles. He turned water into wine and stilled storms on the Sea of Galilee. He caused a school of fish to swim right into Peter's net and He walked on water.

This is different. It is destructive and seems to serve no purpose. As some have noted, it looks like a misuse of power over a poor, innocent little fig tree.⁴

³ Understood in this way, Jesus' curse makes Him appear vindictive and irrational, so Bertrand Russell who wrote, *"I cannot myself feel that either in the matter of wisdom or in the matter of virtue Christ stands quite as high as some other people known to history."* T.W. Manson, a biblical scholar and careful student of the life of Jesus was also not impressed with this act. *"It is a tale of miraculous power wasted in the service of ill-temper; as it stands [the story] is simply incredible."*

But those who think this way miss what has been obvious from the earliest times, namely, that the miracle was an acted-out parable. This miracle of destruction gave a “coming attraction” to another greater destruction that would occur for the same reason that the fig tree was cursed - a lack of fruit.⁵

Immediately after Jesus dealt with the fig tree on the way to the temple, Mark locates Him IN the temple. He’s already done His reconnaissance. It is time for action.

The cleansing of the Temple (vv. 15-17)

[15] Then they came to Jerusalem. And He entered the temple and began to drive out those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling doves; [16] and He would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple. [17] And He began to teach and say to them, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a robbers’ den.”

When walking through the Temple precincts, the last things you expect to encounter are the buying and selling of merchandise and unjust trading practices. You don’t expect to see sincere folks who have come to the temple to worship God getting crowded out of the way.

But that is exactly what Jesus had found on the previous day when He walked through and looked around at everything. It was still going on when He came back. So He dealt with it.

Earlier, a fig tree that gave a show of bearing fruit with its large and beautiful leaves, but had no fruit at all, but was only a sham, was doomed to never bear fruit again.

And a massive structure that looked like a temple, smelled like a temple, and was built to be a temple but was devoid of the worship of God would soon not be allowed to be a fruitless sham anymore, either.

The Triumphal Entry and Jesus’ reconnaissance “look around” at the temple occurred on a Sunday. His cursing of the fruitless fig tree and cleansing of the fruitless temple was a Monday thing.

On Tuesday morning Jesus and His disciples were out walking again. They passed by the fig tree. All the disciples saw what had happened, but it was Peter who pointed out the obvious.

The Miracle Observed: (vv. 19-21)

[19] When evening came, they would go out of the city. [20] As they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up.⁶ [21] Being reminded, Peter said to Him, “Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered.”⁷

The disciples had been listening when Jesus spoke to the tree. (see verse 14) He wanted them to listen.

He cursed the tree *out loud* so that they would know that when the tree died it was His word that had caused it to die. It wasn’t just a coincidence that the tree died overnight. Jesus did it.

And now they understood that He wasn’t just making noise. The miracle of destruction actually followed Jesus’ words. There is power - the power of God! - in the words of Jesus.

The way I read Peter’s words, it seems that he was pretty surprised that the thing actually happened. Jesus’ reply makes it clear that there was no reason to have been surprised.

⁴ The story sounds apocryphal. See The Infancy Gospel of Thomas for similar stories.

⁵ Jesus didn’t curse this fig tree because it didn’t satisfy His appetite. He cursed the fig tree because it gave every indication of bearing fruit and it didn’t have fruit.

⁶ Matthew tells us that the fig tree’s death was instantaneous.

⁷ The curse of the fig tree is a symbol of God’s judgment of the Temple. Note the places in the Old Testament where the fig tree is brought in as a symbol of judgment (Isaiah 34:4; Jeremiah 29:17; Hosea 2:12; 9:10; Joel 1:7; Micah 7:1)

Fig Trees and... (vv. 22-25)

...Faith (v. 22-23)

God is faithful (v. 22)

[22] And Jesus answered saying to them, “Have faith in God.”⁸

Mark says that Jesus “answered” Peter’s observation. We are to understand then, that there was a question behind the comment. I wonder what Peter’s underlying question was...

Maybe it was something like, “*Wow - and how did THAT happen?*” or “*What in the world made it possible for Jesus’ words, spoken to a perfectly healthy fig tree, to result in its overnight demise?*”

Jesus’ answer: Have faith in God.

God can do things that would never happen without Him. Nothing is too hard for God. He’s God, after all. He does whatever He wants to do.

What Peter and James and John and Dave and you and the rest of us here are to do with the fact of God’s sovereign power and authority is believe Him.

There are lots of ways to say that. Have faith in God. Trust God. Rely on God. Believe God. They all mean essentially the same thing.

We are to live, embracing the idea that God is infinitely ABLE. We are to never allow that truth to move off the front burner of our minds.

Jesus says that if we will live that way we will open a door to the miracle-working power of God in a way that is not opened to us if we don’t live that way.

For instance? We keep reading and listen as He gives an example every bit as physical as the withering of a healthy tree.

Mountain-moving faith (v. 23)

[23] “Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him.

OK. You should know that there are about as many ways of dealing with Jesus’ words here as there are commentators. People are all over the map trying to explain what Jesus means. So I’ll throw my two cents into the mix.

This conversation is taking place beside the withered up fig tree that Jesus and the disciples encountered on one of their trips back and forth between Bethany and Jerusalem.

He says, “**THIS** (emphasis mine) **mountain**” not “**A mountain**.” He’s got a certain mountain in mind as He speaks. I can picture Him pointing to a mountain.

Remember. He has just cursed a fig tree to symbolically represent what God is going to do to a temple that doesn’t have any more (spiritual) fruit than that fig-tree had (physical) fruit.

So I have wondered if Jesus was looking up at the hills on which Jerusalem was built and predicting (using the symbolic language of mountain tossing) the soon-to-come destruction of the temple.⁹

Such a prediction would have seemed laughable to any Jew of Jesus’ day! Nothing was more massive, more indestructible looking, more permanent than Herod’s temple.

⁸ Both Matthew and Mark use the cursing of the fig tree to draw lessons about the power of faith. But neither in Matthew nor Mark does Jesus really take time to interpret the cursing of the fig tree.

⁹ Edwards suggests that Jesus had the fortress Herodian in mind. Lane suggests that the mountain in mind is the Mount of Olives, which will be split in two when Messiah returns. (Zechariah 14:10)

By the time we come to Mark 11 it had been under construction for nearly half a century. “*Sure,*” people would have thought, “*God might perform miracles, but this temple’s not going anywhere.*”

Yet that is what Jesus said was going to happen when He tied the cursing of the fig tree to the cleansing of the temple. He didn’t come right out and say it, but the message was clear: “*God is going to destroy the temple as surely as I just withered the fig tree.*”¹⁰

About thirty five years after this scene, it all came to pass just as Jesus said it would. The Romans marched in to Jerusalem to quell a rebellion against the Empire and tore the temple apart. They obliterated it and sacked Jerusalem, too, killing upwards of six hundred thousand people. When the Romans were done, not one temple stone was left standing on top of another.

The comment about tossing a mountain into the sea is a figure of speech called hyperbole. It is exaggeration to make a point.

Now that doesn’t mean that Jesus isn’t saying something with meaning. He is simply using over the top language to say that God is able to do the impossible. He can instantaneously wither a perfectly healthy fig tree. He can bring to nothing a massive, stone-built temple. He can do anything.

“***Have faith in God***” indeed. Put your faith in this can-do-anything God! And when you are praying, remember that you are praying to THAT God.

...Prayer (v. 24)

[24] “Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you.

¹⁰ While many people disagree about which “mountain Jesus had in mind” (or if He had any particular mountain in mind at all), most are agreed that the cursing of the fig tree was a foreshadowing of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

Again, this is a hard saying. This is a challenging verse. I don’t know anybody for whom these words don’t present some difficulty. They leave us - they leave ME - off balance.

I’ve mentioned the verse throughout the week to several friends as I’ve met with people. They all have nodded their heads and agreed that it’s hard to know exactly what Jesus is saying here.

The Bible is peppered throughout with other teachings about prayer that are somewhat easier to deal with than this comment. Often there are conditions to be met to receive an answer - ask according to God’s will, ask with proper motives, stuff like that.

And these conditions actually help us understand why we may not be receiving the answers we are seeking and praying about.

Here, though, there is none of that. It is as clear a promise as you will find that God will grant you the answer to your prayer if you believe that you have already been given what you are asking for. (And I should mention that the commentaries I’ve consulted on this verse are predictably and laughably unhelpful.)

So, again, what is Jesus saying here in this over-the-top radical statement?

To be honest, it seems to me that He is overstating the case. He is exaggerating. He is, again, using hyperbole.

It was hyperbole when He spoke of tossing a mountain into the sea. We hear Him say that and there is not one of us here who think that He literally meant that mountains would be splashing into the ocean in response to our prayers.

We don’t think He was lying. His point was that God can do anything.

Here, He’s not lying, either. I will reverently suggest that Jesus is overstating to make a point. So, what is His point? If this is hyperbole, what is Jesus saying?

- Could He be saying that faith-filled, believing prayer taps God's power to accomplish the humanly impossible?
- Could He be saying that a miracle-working sovereign-over-all God is waiting for His people to trust Him enough to ask Him to do things that only He can do - and that when we believe Him enough to ask, He will do them?
- Could He be saying to us, to me, to you, that we have not yet plumbed the depths of what God is willing to do in response to our prayers? That when it comes to prayer there is MORE available to us than we have as yet entered into?

By bringing this “take” on this passage, I’m obviously leaving the door open to the reality of unanswered prayer. Every one of us here knows what it is to have prayed about something - even fervently, we would even say faith-fully - and NOT received what we have prayed for.

We freely admit that whenever we pray there are other things going on beyond our request and there is more going on than whether or not we believe.

We can't override God's sovereign will. He sometimes will say “No” out of kindness to us. He will sometimes say, “Yes” but in His timing so that the current answer appears to be “No.”

There are reasons for unanswered prayer other than faithlessness on our part and to say otherwise is both unwise and cruel.

But when I read Jesus' words here, I am confronted with the reality that the Bible describes something that is beyond my experience.

I don't often enough enter into prayer as faithfully as He calls me to. I don't pray as fervently as I would like to. And when my experience doesn't mesh with what I read in the Bible I am faced with a choice.

It is possible that I would re-interpret Scripture so that it fits my experience. This turns a wholesome desire to explain and understand into a very ugly desire to *explain away* stuff that is hard to live out.

But when what I read in the Bible doesn't fit my experience it is also possible that I might admit that my experience is sub-biblical. That is the option that leads to growth and change and maturity and transformation.

Can we agree today that Jesus is both promising something about Gods' willingness to answer our prayers AND that He is calling us to greater faith?

If you are where I am, will you join me in admitting that your prayer life, that most intimate aspect of your relationship with God, is not fully grown?

Will you join me in the passionate pursuit of a life-changing relationship with God that takes Him at His word and prays outrageous prayers and believes that He is infinitely ABLE to do exceeding abundantly beyond anything we could either ask or think?

I can't think of a more exciting journey to commence that this, today!

And then, while He's on the subject of prayer, Jesus wants us to know that when it comes to receiving answers, faithful asking isn't the only stipulation. We are also required to forgive.

...Forgiveness (v. 25)

[25] “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions.”¹¹

Lord Jesus, teach us to forgive as we have been forgiven.

¹¹ Almost certainly, verse 26 (“*But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.*”) is not a part of Mark's original Gospel, but was copied over by a scribe who was familiar with Matthew 6:15. Mark 11:26 is not contained in any of the oldest or more reliable manuscripts.