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The National Presbyterian Church

Questioning Jesus: "Is It Not Written?"

Mark 11:1-14; 15-19, Luke 4:16-19

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In the four gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry in the Bible, there are over 500 questions. Some of those questions are asked by people directed towards Jesus: some to find out information that they don't know ("Jesus, help us out here!"); some to trick Jesus to say something that would get him into trouble with the authorities. Sometimes, on the other hand, it's Jesus who is asking questions of people. Often these questions are challenging questions like, "Are you still sleeping?" or "Who is the greater?" or "Have you no faith?" So the questions from one source or another keep appearing in the pages of the gospels.

In the past few weeks, in this season of Lent leading up to Holy Week and Easter, we've been looking at a number of these questions, just the tip of the iceberg really, from those 500. And we come this morning to one of the questions that Jesus asked on the day after the first Palm Sunday, the day after Jesus enters Jerusalem, and once in Jerusalem, within the temple: he asks this question: "*Is it not written?*" . . . "*Is it not written?*"

Jesus' Background Leading Up To Palm Sunday. Let me set the scene for this question by taking us back a few months to the time when Jesus shares with his disciples that he is going to die (see Mark 8:31). The disciples do not want to hear that Jesus is going to die. They want him to move from one victory to another and they do not see his death as any kind of a victory. But Jesus says he's going to die. He's going to die, he says, at the hands of the chief priests and of the Roman authorities -- which means Jesus expects that it is going to happen in Jerusalem, because that's where the chief priests and the Roman authorities primarily live.

When Jesus shares this devastating piece of information, he and the disciples are not in Jerusalem and the disciples want to keep it that way for as long as they possibly can! But Jesus doesn't seem to share their concern. He wants to head to Jerusalem. In fact when we read Luke's account of Jesus' ministry, we read in Luke 9:51 that Jesus "sets his face to go to Jerusalem." So there is a sense of determination and destiny about this within Jesus' life.

Palm Sunday. And it's on that first Palm Sunday that Jesus and his followers actually arrive, just outside Jerusalem on a hill called the Mount of Olives. Looking across a valley called the Kidron Valley there's another hill on which the city of Jerusalem and its temple are to be found. Before entering the city on his march towards his death, Jesus lingers there on the hillside while he asks his disciples to do something rather strange – to go and find a donkey, a young donkey, that has never been ridden before, and bring it to him (Mark 11:2).

And the disciples go and do this. They find a donkey (and apparently somebody is willing to share their donkey) and they bring it to Jesus, and Jesus sits on the donkey which has on it a saddle made of the garments that people throw on it, and then the descent begins down the steep hill of the Mount of Olives across the valley and into Jerusalem.

As the descent begins, a crowd gathers spontaneously and begins singing from Psalm 118. It's in Psalm 118 that we find the "Palm Sunday" exclamation, "Hosanna!" which means "Lord save us!" And there, too, we find the words, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." This is a Psalm about the coming Messiah. The Messiah was the King that God was going to send who would save his people from all kinds of things – not merely leading them into eternal life beyond the grave, but being their help, their refuge, and their strength, throughout all of life. And the crowd spontaneously begins to sing this psalm with branches waving, as Jesus on the donkey, accompanied by his disciples, heads down the hill and across the valley and then up into Jerusalem. Once in Jerusalem, we hear no more about the Palm Sunday crowd.

This is probably because they are now dispersed among the huge numbers of people who are in the city for the Feast of the Passover. Historians (see J. Jeremias, Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus) tell us that the population of Jerusalem at that particular time was probably around 20-30,000, and somewhere around 150,000 pilgrims (up to five times the population) came from all over Israel and indeed the world to come to the Feast of the Passover. That would be like bringing like about 20 more million people here into the DC metro area – and this, then as now, would lead to gridlock! Just a huge influx of people.

The Day After Palm Sunday. So the Palm Sunday folks somehow melt away and blend into this huge crowd, leaving the focus on Jesus who when he enters the city, goes into the temple (which is very near the Kidron Valley and the Mount of Olives), and he begins to look around (Mark 11:11)

When we think of Jesus entering the temple we're not really thinking of Jesus entering a building, but entering a campus, rather like ours at National. If you want to think of the temple in Jerusalem in those days you have to think of an area, a complex, of some 26 acres. We have about 12 acres here at National. So the temple as a complex was about twice the size of our property here.

And in some other ways, too, the temple complex was rather similar to our property here. There was a building with very sharp high walls right in the heart of this temple complex, just like our main sanctuary building here. And then there were open spaces all around about this building. And then out towards the edge of the complex there was something called the "Court of the Gentiles." So, think of this building, then our parking space that is relatively open, and then move out beyond that to the border with Van Ness and Nebraska – and that's where you have this outer court called the Court of the Gentiles. And Jesus probably goes into this particular area.

And Jesus looks around as if he's got something up his sleeve, but he doesn't do anything. Instead he heads back out of town, across the Kidron Valley, back up the Mount of Olives, to a small town called Bethany (Mark 11:11), where he spends the night, probably with some friends of his. We know Mary, Martha and their brother, Lazarus lived in Bethany (John 12:3). And then the next morning he returns to Jerusalem and returns to the temple. And when he enters the temple immediately Jesus creates a ruckus; Jesus creates an enormous commotion.

In The Temple. And that's when he asks the question which is our focal point today "*Is it not written?*" I doubt that he asks it in a very gentle way. He says it almost certainly with his finger pointing and with a shout saying, "Is it not WRITTEN?" As if to say:

- "Do *YOU* NOT KNOW what is in God's book?"
- "Have *YOU* not heard what GOD has said?"
- "Do you not know what the GREAT PROPHETS Isaiah and Jeremiah said long ago about this place?"
- "Is -- it -- not -- *written?* . . . "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations, but you have made it a den of robbers." "A DEN of ROBBERS."

The Issue. So what's Jesus implying when he blurts this out?

Well some people would say that when Jesus says this in the temple, he's speaking to those directly (and at the least he is) who are buying and selling animals for sacrifice and exchanging money in the temple (every day coins in exchange for the Tyrian Shekel, the only coinage which could be used in the temple offering for the worship of God). Jesus speaks to these traders and bluntly says they were stealing, robbing, cheating the people economically! Jesus is clearly opposed to this.

This is no doubt partially true, but I would rather follow the understanding of those scholars who would draw a bigger picture than this. If you were a pilgrim to Jerusalem and you wanted to make a sacrifice when you arrived, the chances are you would not bring your own animal with you on the journey. Any sacrifice acceptable to God had to be pretty much perfect and the danger of an animal falling or breaking a leg or being blemished in some way would be so great. So the buying and selling of animals for sacrifice (doves if you didn't have much money or sheep if you had more money) or if you were making a specific offering, was a necessary part of the whole event of Passover. Nothing wrong with it, in and of itself. Indeed it was absolutely necessary for the normal worship of the people of God.

Indeed, the evidence is that when pilgrims came to Jerusalem in the first century, to worship God, there were markets outside the temple, some of them on the Mount of Olives itself (Jeremias, Jerusalem, pp 48-49; Wm Lane, Commentary on the Gospel of Mark, p.403), for the buying and selling of sacrifices for worship in the temple, and for exchanging your currency into the currency which was acceptable for offerings in the temple. But something had happened. And it was to this that I think Jesus was speaking. Those markets outside the temple area had

begun to move into the temple. There must have been some business person (maybe the chief priest himself? – clearly his permission was necessary) who was really savvy and who knew how to market those sacrifices:

“Listen, we’ve now got one-stop shopping. You don’t have to buy your sacrifice out there. There’s a chance when you cross the Kidron Valley that it will be damaged and will become useless. So let me give you a deal you cannot refuse. Let’s bring the market into the temple, into the Court of the Gentiles which is a waste of good space for people who are not like us, and the sacrifice will be made within a few yards from there.”

And that I think was what bothered Jesus, and bothered Jesus a great deal. Of course some people were engaged in unfair business practices. That would always be the case; this was a monopoly; you were stuck when you got to Jerusalem: you almost had to use one of these markets. And Jesus might well have been partially pointing in that direction. But what I believe bothered him most was this encroachment into the space reserved for people from all over the world to worship God. It was to this that Jesus was speaking: *“Is it not written: My house shall become a house of prayer for all the nations. But you have made it into a den of robbers.”* Filling the Court of Gentiles with “stuff and business,” even “religious stuff and business,” was holding back that space from the purpose that God intended – an intention to create a symbol within the temple complex itself that the God of God’s ancient people, the Jews, was not just their God but the God of *the whole world*, passionate about *all people, everywhere*.

Remember? “God so loved *the world* that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16).

And the invasion of the Court of Gentiles with this market was a defrauding of God, a robbing from God, of the worship that was due his name from the whole of the world.

Religious stuff, doing what was right and not wrong in itself, but in the wrong place in the wrong time, led to a shift in the sense of the mission of God which Jesus now attacked.

Mission Drift. We call it “mission drift” when we start off with a great and clear purpose, and before we know it, even though we may still be doing something that’s right, or at least not wrong, we simply don’t have the passion or the edge or the size or the grandeur of the goal with which we started out in the first place, that God intended for us to have.

Some of you may know a modern day parable about mission drift that I’d like to share with you now. It’s about a lifesaving station. It can happen so easily and it can happen like this.

On a dangerous seacoast where storms and shipwrecks often occur there was once a crude little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea and with no thought for themselves they went out day or night to save lives at risk through storms, rocks and wrecks.

Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station so that it became famous. Some of those who were saved and various others in the surrounding areas wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought, new crews were trained. The little lifesaving station grew. Some of the new members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge for those saved from the sea.

So they replaced the emergency cots with beds, put better furniture in an enlarged building, and now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members. They redecorated it beautifully and furnished it as, well, a sort of “club.”

Less of the members were now interested in going to sea in lifesaving missions, but some still did until the time when a large ship was wrecked off the coast and the crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet, half-drowned and dirty people who, of course, immediately messed up the newly renovated building.

At the next meeting of the members there was a split. Most of the members voted to stop the club's lifesaving activities altogether as being expensive, unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal pattern of the new life of the club. And the others were informed that if they wanted to pursue the original purpose of the club, well they'd just have to do it somewhere else.

Isn't that how it happens? One thing leads to another, and before we know it the original vision, the original passion, the thing which drives our lives, the thing which is right and good and holy becomes transformed into something else?

The markets were necessary; they were vital. Somebody was doing a service for something and somebody else, but God's passion – God's passion was not just for the holy huddle over here, but for the world! And the vision was being changed by what happened there. Almost unseen, not with deliberate attention, but just the way it was, a growing self-centeredness and the image of the temple which speaks not only of God's holiness and God's ancient people, but of the whole world, is pushed to the side.

And all this caused Jesus not merely to be mildly upset, but to be so angry that he turned over the tables and threw those people out and stopped them coming in, with an anger which I suppose at least should make us sit up and ask us a question or two.

- In particular, could it be that he's mad with us as well?
- Could it be that we don't see how we have drifted as well from something that was passionate and grand and glorious and Godly into something which has a measure of all these but is not what God intends for our lives.
- To put it more positively, how do we find God's mission for our lives? And how in a world which is constantly pushing and pulling at us so that we are going to inevitably be pushed off

track, how do we stay on task in this kind of a world, so that Jesus doesn't have to come to us too in the same kind of way?

- Or, if we were to halt Jesus in his tracks, and say to him, “Jesus, hold on a minute, it's not as bad as all that, I really want to fulfill my mission for you. We really want to fulfill our mission for you. How in the world do we do it?”— What would he say?

If we were to ask Jesus that question I actually think he might respond exactly as he did on that time in the temple when he was so angry. I think he would turn to us and say to us as he said to them, "*Is it not written?*" That is to say: “*Don't you know that God has given his word to us, and that if we read it, learn it, and digest it, we will find that the written word will act as a powerful channel of God's grace coming into our lives and flowing through our lives to guide and direct us, in both the big things and in the small things as well.*”

Jesus And Scripture. In fact one of the most powerful truths about Jesus' life that we see embodied in the Palm Sunday story, but that goes back all through his life is that Jesus, though he was the Son of God, the divine son of God, who presumably has a “direct line to heaven,” did not always find his guidance from God coming through this direct line! Indeed, what we see is that his guidance from God frequently came from the fact that he knew what had been written in the Scriptures, learning the book even from childhood. It was his custom, we read, to be in the synagogue from Sabbath to Sabbath to hear the word, to reflect on it and to discuss it with others (Luke 4:16).

- This knowledge of the scriptures is seen in Jesus' life at the beginning of his ministry when he was tempted by the devil to “mission drift” from God’s path. The devil says, “Come on; use your divine power to impress other people. Take stones and turn them into bread.” And Jesus from his memory pulls out Deuteronomy 8:3, and says, "*Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.*" We need the word that is written in scripture, at least Jesus did!
- And then, after the temptation, when Jesus set out on his ministry it's from what was written in the scripture (Isaiah 61) that Jesus distills his job description, as if to say to the people in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, “what is written in Isaiah 61 is written about me:
- "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, the literal poor and the poor in spirit. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, to the literal captives and those who are in captivity to sin. He has sent me to provide recovery of sight to the blind, to those who are physically in difficulty and those who are spiritually blind as well, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."
- The direction of Jesus' mission was determined by what he read in the book.
- And when we come to Palm Sunday we find that Jesus' steps were also determined by what he read in the book.

- ❖ It was no accident, for example, that Jesus entered Jerusalem by the Mount of Olives. It was written in Zechariah 14:4 that the Messiah would come through the Mount of Olives.
- ❖ It was no accident that he found a donkey and rode on it as he entered the city. Zechariah also says that when the Messiah comes he will come humble and sitting riding on a donkey, and yet he will be a king (9:9).
- ❖ It is no accident that when Jesus entered the temple he did so not merely to teach quietly, but with an act of righteousness and of judgment on what was going on there. This was to fulfill what was written in the book of Malachi (3:1).

And there is no doubt to me that Jesus planned it this way deliberately. He knew these texts and he put them into practice. But when we look at all the prophesies about what the Messiah would do, what we find is that there is no way that Jesus could plan all of them. Some of them he did, but far more happened in ways which no person could ever plan.

- Rising from the dead the scriptures speak of and you can't plan that (Psalm 16:1).
- Being buried in a rich man's tomb (Isaiah 53:9): it would have been hard for Jesus to plan that.
- Gathering the crowds around who spontaneously sang from Psalm 118, a Messianic song, I tend to think that that just happened by the will of God.
- And then suffering – suffering as he did for our sin, as Isaiah 53 says would happen to God's chosen servant. Well, maybe Jesus planned his death, he knew it was coming. He certainly marched towards it. But who, knowing the excruciating death that he would face, would stick with the plan? Surely there would be “mission drift” there, away from that inhumanely hard part -- but the central part – of the plan for your salvation and mine. But the Jesus we know stuck with it to the end. I'm, sure he knew, but he would have needed God's strength to abide by what we read in Isaiah 53:

"He was despised and rejected by others, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, as one from whom others hide their faces, he was despised and we held him of no account.

All we like sheep have gone astray. We have all turned to our own way, but the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence and there was no deceit in his mouth."

Jesus had his mission – derived from what was written in Scripture! And he stuck with his mission for you and me, because he knew this was the will of God revealed not just directly from Heaven, but in the book that was written for him and also for us. The Bible (our Old Testament) was the book of his life, the book that determined his steps on that first Palm Sunday: it should have come as no surprise that when he entered the temple that he said to those who had stolen the worship of God away from the rest of the world (from gentiles like you and me), no surprise at all that he said, "Is it not written?"

If Jesus found his guidance there, if he read, learned, and followed “what was written,” surely we can do no less? It may be that we are far from God – and the word that is written will bring us back home again. But it also maybe that we are just drifting from God, like the buyers and sellers on the day after Palm Sunday. Read the book! With the help of Scripture, re-focus you mission – mission with a small “m” for today or tomorrow, or with a big “M” for your life with the help of scripture, and ask God through Jesus Christ to keep us on task for him! For, "Is it not written?" To which Jesus would say, “Oh yes! It is written indeed, for me and for you.”

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