

Up To Jerusalem

Matthew 7:1-13

Matthew 20:17-34

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Fifth Sunday in Lent

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Today we turn the corner in our readings from Matthew from first to last, from Jesus' first journey up the mountain in Galilee to deliver his inaugural sermon on the mount, to his final journey up to Jerusalem along the road from Jericho. We turn from radical teachings about not judging, asking boldly in prayer, living by the Golden Rule, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you."ⁱ Entering by the narrow gate, to now on this final journey actually entering and seeing just how narrow and hard the gate will be.

It's like we move consecutively through a series of narrowing gates along this road, each successive gate more narrow than the one before, until we, arrive in a few weeks on Good Friday, at the ghastly foot of the Cross, whereas Jesus tells his disciples, "the Son of Man came to give his life a ransom for many." The Cross- is where all this is heading.

I have walked down that dusty ancient road from Jerusalem to Jericho. It is still there, not far from the modern highway nearby. It skirts along a narrow stream, dry in some places. Ancient Roman aqueducts still run along the stream at points moving a little more water through this dry, dusty, arid region, surrounded on both sides by red clay mountains.

You can well grasp why Jesus set his story of the Good Samaritan here. The region is barren, and dangerous even now. As we walked this way with our little group, we had to be careful of bandits and gangs. We stuck together - passing little mud brick houses of Palestinian farmers along the road, past their chickens and goats. Yes, you may wonder why a bunch of American preachers were wandering around like this?

Jericho is 15 miles East of Jerusalem. It sits at a negative elevation 825 feet below sea level. Jerusalem rises to an elevation of 2557 feet above sea level, so from Jericho it is an ascent of 3382 up to Jerusalem. a difference of 1731 feet. To make the walk up to Jerusalem is quite a hike. Psalms 120 to 134 are called the Psalms of Ascent and were recited by Jewish pilgrims as they made their way up to the Holy City for the festivals along this road. To approach Jerusalem from any direction involves a great upward climb.

Our group that day wisely decided to walk the other way, not up like a pilgrim but down, like a tourist, down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Even that was quite a workout, and we ended up not getting back to our rooms at Tantur Ecumenical Center near Bethlehem until around Midnight. But to climb up, up to Jerusalem - that is what this final journey for Jesus and us is all about.

As the journey begins Jesus tells them what is about to happen. “While Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves.” These who had been living with him, traveling with him, learning from him, often missing his deeper meanings for three years now. He takes them aside and tells them clearly now for the third time where all this is heading.

Each of the Synoptic Gospels has Jesus sharing this Passion Prediction three times. In this third recounting in Matthew, Jesus is most explicit, naming specific events that will soon unfold. It’s like the table of contents of a book.

Chapter 1 – “See we are going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes.”

Chapter 2- “They will condemn him to death.”

Chapter 3- “They will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged.”

Chapter 4- “He will be Crucified.”

Chapter 5- “On the third day he will be raised.”

Jesus lays it all out, what will soon take place. The cross and a heinous death by crucifixion. Yet a saving death. The gruesome painting on the bulletin cover by Matthias Grunewald, a central panel of the famous 16th century Isenheim Altarpiece now in a Museum in France, is one of the most vivid portrayals of the crucifixion ever created. Karl Barth the great theologian, was so moved by this image that he had it hung over his desk where he wrote his vast theology. He faced the cross daily.

There we see the naked bleeding body of Jesus, nail-pierced fingers outstretched in agony, his body pale almost lifeless. On one side of the cross, Mary his mother swoons in the arms of John, the only disciple still there. On the other side of the cross John the Baptist, open Old Testament book in hand points to Jesus as the fulfillment of all the prophets had written. At his feet a lamb, its blood dripping into a cup. This is Jesus the lamb that was slain for the sins of the whole world.

Here in brief is the outline of Jesus’ solemn passion which will soon unfold up in Jerusalem.

II

Into this deep mysterious moment comes a comical disruption. The mother of James and John, Zebedee’s wife, her sons alongside, appears on the scene, kneels before Jesus and asks a most forward, rude, disrespectful and really ignorant question. Can you do us a favor? “What do you want?” Jesus asks. She replies, “Can my boys have the best seats on either side of you in this new Kingdom you are bringing?”

Maybe you have a mother like this. She wants the best for her boys. She has pushed them to study hard at school, go out for sports, and take piano lessons. Not miss any

opportunity that comes their way. She wants only the best for them. She wants well-rounded successful boys. I had a mother like that! She pushed me. She envisioned me as an international lawyer, and asked, during the season I was wrestling with entering the ministry, “Couldn’t you be content being an international lawyer and just teaching an adult Sunday School Class?”

James and John’s mother wants them to get the best seats in the room. Did you see how much some of the seats at BJCC for the playoff games last Saturday were selling for on the internet when Auburn met Houston, and Alabama met Maryland? I saw tickets being offered for upwards of \$1200. Dr. Larry Michael got a seat. He did not pay that. He told me he only paid face value. But he did get a seat!

That is what this mother wants for her sons, the best seats in the new kingdom. Jesus kindly tells her, “You do not know what you are asking.” Much of the time, we do not really know what we are asking when we say we want to follow Jesus.

As Thomas of a Kempis wrote, “Jesus has many lovers of his heavenly Kingdom, but few bearers of his Cross.” As Simon the Zealot sings in the musical Godspell “Christ you know I love you⁷. Did you see I waved? I believe in you and God, so tell me that I’m saved.”

Jesus simply asks this mother and her boys James and John, “Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” Enthusiastically they respond, “O yes yes we are able!” They do not know what they are saying. “You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant,”

We really do not know what we are talking about when we say we are ready to follow Jesus. Only One can fully drink the cup Jesus is about to drink.

New York Times writer Ross Douthet wrote an op ed article awhile back about how our modern user- friendly user religion misses the depths of the Christian message. He wrote,

“Christians have given up on the really challenging things, the Spiritual Disciplines that make real demands, and have emphasized the more worldly expressions of faith – the cultural wars issues for the conservative, and the social justice issues for the liberals. They’ve left behind the quest to know the depth and heights of a vast and mysterious God, the yearning for closeness to God, the willingness to wrestle with the darkness in their own souls.”

Douthet emphasized what the great spiritual writers have always said, “That real spiritual breakthroughs require us to go deep in a particular tradition, without that, faith just becomes a form of comfortable therapy, with no capacity to deepen or challenge our lives.”ⁱⁱ

Headed to Jerusalem Jesus tells us the way he is going, and what will take place there, as he calls us to follow. He says discipleship involves not worldly power but humble service.

We are not to be like James and John, jockeying for the best, and using their mother as a buffer, while the others become angry that these two have pushed themselves forward ahead of them. We are to be different from heavy handed top-down bosses.

“It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.”

III

Continuing up to Jerusalem, as they are leaving Jericho on this road are two blind men. They recognize Jesus and cry out. “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!”ⁱⁱⁱ It’s interesting, blind men see that what seasoned disciples miss. They see him for who he is - the ruling reigning “Lord, the Son of David,” They plead for mercy while the disciples plead for best seats.

Ignoring the crowd who try to silence these two blind men, Jesus stops, Jesus always stopped. Jesus always had time for those in genuine need. He stands still and asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” They plead, “Lord, let us our eyes be opened.” And Jesus is moved with compassion. He touches their eyes and they immediately regain their sight and follow him on the road up to Jerusalem.

Here is a great reversal- which the whole gospel in fact is. Insiders become outsiders. Outsiders become insiders. Two blind men see with their inner eyes, before they are given back their sight. Two disciples, given eyes to see, having traveled with Jesus over three years of training in Discipleship 101 are blind to the real nature of discipleship, servant leadership, and what Jesus’ Kingdom is all about.

Imagine what these two formerly blind men see with their new eyes now as they follow Jesus all the way up, up that road to Jerusalem. Let us imagine, they see him all through that week as Jesus makes his grand humble entrance on Palm Sunday riding on a donkey, they see him as he teaches daily in the Temple grounds. They stand outside an upper room as he gathers on Thursday with his disciples for a last meal. Maybe they can hear the hymns they sing after supper. They follow him to a Garden where they see his arrest, and follow their Lord the Son of David to the High Priest’s courtyard, then on to Pilate’s house.

Then, they are among the chaotic crowd on Friday as a seeing blood-thirsty mob cries “Let him be crucified!” Finally, let us imagine, they stand on that barren lonely hill outside the City gates at the trash heap and they see him as he is hung on a tree stark naked. As he dies, suddenly the sky turns black, the sun is covered with a total solar eclipse, there is universal pitch-black darkness from noon to three o’clock. The whole world becomes universally blind in those hours.

Jesus ask disciples then, and Jesus asks us, now can you drink the cup, the bitter cup that I am about to drink? None of us fully can. Only Jesus can fully drink the cup he drinks for us. But Jesus offers us a share of his cup and bids us drink.

He invites us to get on the Jerusalem road with him and follow, follow to the cross, then to the crown. Doing so calls for our full loyalty and love. Doing so demands we take up our share of his cross drink our share of his cup, and follow him, flawed, imperfect, failing sometimes like James and John, but staying on the road with him. “Must Jesus bear the cross alone, and all the world go free? No, there’s a cross for me”

The reality is, as C.S. Lewis says, we will never know fully what Jesus can do with us until we give ourselves fully over to him.

“The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, is to hand over your whole self- all your wishes and precautions – to Christ. But it is far easier than what we are all trying to do instead. For what we are trying to do is to remain what we call” ourselves,” to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, and yet at the same time to be” good.” We are all trying to let our mind and heart go their own way – centered on money or pleasure or ambition – and hoping, in spite of this, to behave honestly and chastely and humbly.”

Lewis hears Jesus saying,

“If you let me, I will make you perfect. The moment you put yourself in my hands, that is what you are in for... You can push me away. But understand that I am going to see this job through.”^{iv}

Going up to Jerusalem Jesus says all these things to us. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” Will we listen, will we hear, will we see, will we follow.
Amen.

ⁱ Mt. 7:12

ⁱⁱ Ross Douthet, quoted by Samuel Lloyd III in Sermons from the National Cathedral – Soundings for the Journey

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 20:30

^{iv} C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, p. 168