

MESSAGE - Step One
First Sunday of Lent – February 21, 2021
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I remember back many years ago, the work of someone who claimed the role of prophet.....

Leading a church

Ministry was going really well

Youth groups and mission trips

Excellent music in worship

Giving was up and we had so much excess we were able to begin a \$1,000 gift to other charity organizations in the area every month.

And then the letters started...

From this man who claimed the role of prophet

- He made a lot of claims of unfaithfulness about the church
- Not only the church I was serving, but others in the area
- Said we weren't taking care of the poor like was told to do in scripture
- Said we weren't caring for the widow and orphan.
- Said our priorities were all mixed up.

I remember thinking: how do you even claim this? It doesn't seem like you even know us.

It felt like blatant disrespect and it got under my skin. And my greatest failure, I confess, was to work in my heart and mind to discount him and his witness...who was he anyhow?

And so, while I find myself rooting for Jesus in our story for today, I reflect on those experiences and I also understand the reaction of the religious leaders.

Mark 11:15-19

¹⁵ On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, ¹⁶ and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. ¹⁷ And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not

written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'^[a]? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'^[b]"

¹⁸ The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

¹⁹ When evening came, Jesus and his disciples^[c] went out of the city.

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Now, as we look at the course of events during Jesus' last week, as we are doing this Lent, this is one of the first things that happens right after Jesus is heralded into the city as a king (Palm Sunday).

To set the stage:

It's the week of the great Passover celebration.

The yearly remembrance of God's mighty acts of salvation out of Egypt...defining moment for the Jews.

And so the city was filled.

Throngs of people coming to take part.

They were coming to make a sacrifice, see family and friends, and rejoice in God's love.

And the temple was the center of it all.

So much is going on.

Including: the selling of sacrificial animals and the exchange of money. I believe these festival "services" began to help people fully participate:

- Some people didn't have an animal bring; or it was cumbersome to bring an animal from home, so now they could buy one once they got to Jerusalem.
- And others needed temple money to make an offering...because making an offering with a coin that had Cesar's image on it would be, if not out and out blasphemy, would certainly be bordering on blasphemy. I mean how could you as a good Jew who knows the third commandment forbidding making a graven image, put a graven image into the offering box?

So much going on.

And Jesus walks into the heart of it all.

What happens next shows his heart

His actions show that he knows what's going on:

That the last thing on a lot of people's minds is prayer.

As a matter of fact, a lot of people are there to take advantage of others:

To sell a sacrificial animal at jacked-up, county-fair food booth prices...

To exchange coins at an unfair rate.

How can you do that and claim to be a faithful Jew?

How can you do that and claim to worship the Lord?

How can you do that...take advantage of people, right in the midst of a celebration that remembers God's deliverance of their ancestors – who had themselves been taken advantage of?

How dare they?

They weren't concerned about prayer

They weren't concerned about humbling themselves before the Lord.

They weren't concerned with even honoring the Passover story.

They were interested in themselves.

And to call them out, Jesus overturned their tables and drove out the animals....literally bringing their business to a screeching halt.

But what I find particularly interesting in the telling of the story is:

There is no anger of the merchants reported in Mark's story

Rather, we hear the reaction of the religious leaders – who are so threatened by his truth-telling that they want to have him killed.

They obviously are threatened because they really can't claim ignorance right? They are the ones who supposedly know the rules the most.

No it is not ignorance that drives them....

And we don't hear them coming to a point of confession and repent and plans to change an unfair system.

And I confess, I get it.

Because I felt that indignation when I was faced with that man, the prophet, years ago.

And I think we all do – at any time when our “business as usual”, when our attitudes and judgments of others, when anytime ministry is built for ourselves more than for extending grace to others – when any of that gets called out.

We may find ourselves understanding the reaction of the religious leaders, seeking to silence that voice that calls us to account.

And I have to ask: What does that mean when in the practice of our religion, we end up trying to silence God’s message to us?

The first step is taken:

The first step away from the shouts of “Hosannah” and toward the shouts of “crucify him”.

The first step toward the crucifixion of God.

And we have to – as faithful yet imperfect followers of today ask:

Are we still taking those steps?

I have to ask myself this as I find myself sitting with this story and wanting to completely identify with Jesus....but realizing that perhaps I identify as much if not more with the other folks in the story:

The sellers....interested in myself

The religious leaders.....not wanting to admit to being wrong.

And so this is how it begins, the movement from “hosanna” to “crucify him”.

It happens when we seek to silence God.