

"THE LAST WEEK: TUESDAY"

Mark 11: 20-33

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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In the last week of Jesus' life- it is Tuesday. A lot happened on the Tuesday. In Mark's Gospel it is the busiest day of Holy Week for Jesus, comprising three chapters, totaling 115 verses. Two thirds of those verses center on conflict with the Temple authorities and one third with Jesus' warnings about the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. For Jesus, it is just another day.

On this third Sunday in Lent we are continuing our journey with Jesus during the last week of his life. The days between Palm Sunday and Easter are crucial to understanding who Jesus was and who he is. They are crucial to our faith as Christians. Two weeks ago, we heard about his procession into the holy city on the Sunday on the back of a borrowed colt.

In worship last week, we saw Jesus curse a fig tree on Monday morning and then raise a holy ruckus in the Temple marketplace. Everything Jesus does during this last week is to remind his people that their allegiance should be to God and not to the domination system put in place by their Roman oppressors. This system is defined by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan as *"the political and economic domination of the many by a few and the use of religion to justify it."*

His actions were targeting the religious leaders- and they knew it. After the incident in the Temple, Mark's Gospel tells us that *"the chief priests and the scribes kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching."*

Tuesday morning, we once again find Jesus and his disciples making the two mile walk from their bed and breakfast in Bethany to Jerusalem. As they walk past the unfortunate fig tree Peter calls out, *" Hey, look Jesus! That fig tree you cursed is all withered up and dead."* Always one to take advantage of a teachable moment, Jesus says, *" Have faith in God. With faith anything can happen."* Then he talks briefly about prayer and forgiveness.

As we learned last week, the cursing of the fig tree was a symbol for the cursing of the Temple. Just as the tree wasn't producing good fruit for Jesus to eat, so the temple was not providing the pure, holy fruit desired by God. Jesus is reminding his disciples that losing faith in the temple does not mean losing faith in God.

For the third day in a row, they enter the temple and this time they are met by a "not-so-welcoming" committee. All the big wigs were there- the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders- all standing in the midst of the mess Jesus had created the day before. Custodians were fixing tables and sweeping up. Merchants were still trying to capture the escaped doves.

"Who gave you the right to do this?" they demanded. "Who do you think you are? We want to see your credentials- your seminary degree, your letter of reference from your District Executive, your ordination certificate."

They feel threatened by Jesus because he seeks neither their approval nor their permission. They are desperate men. They are afraid. They are afraid of Jesus. They are afraid of the crowds. They are especially afraid of the Roman political machine that controls them. Fearful people often become angry people and these guys are furious!

The conspiracy against Jesus was first mentioned by Mark way back in chapter three after Jesus healed a man in the synagogue. Now the stakes are getting higher, so they attempt to discredit him in front of the people. They are about to find out just who they are up against. Instead of arguing with them, Jesus says, *"If you can answer my question, I will tell you whatever you want to know."*

These were highly educated men so I would imagine they thought, *"One question? Piece of cake."*

Jesus asked, *"Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"*

My Grandpa used to say, "Never try to have a battle of wits with someone who comes unarmed."

The religious leaders were in way over their heads. And they knew it. John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, and the one who had baptized him, was a prophet revered by the people. Just a few years earlier, John had been beheaded by the brutal King Herod and his power-hungry family. So, Jesus' question to the leaders wasn't just about religion, it was politically loaded. Was the source of John's ministry divine or human? Was he a prophet from God or just a crazy man? Was his execution a crime against God or a justified political act?

They have been backed into a very tight corner and they can find no safe way out. If they say John's authority came from God, then they would be exposed as hypocrites for not supporting his ministry and not opposing his murder. But if they say John's authority was of human origins the crowds would turn against them because they believed him to be one

of God's chosen prophets. Neither answer was politically acceptable, and they knew it. So, they turn to Jesus and say, "*We don't know.*"

I find it interesting that they weren't worried about any spiritual repercussions to their answer- like what God or their Jewish tradition would say. They were only concerned about how Rome and the crowd of people in front of them would react. They were more afraid of losing their own power and their own reputations than they were of Jesus. So, they said, "*We'll take a pass on that one.*"

This is the first of five conflicts between Jesus and the religious leaders on Tuesday. After he bested them in the question about John, he told a parable about them as wicked tenants who killed the landowner's son. They tried to trick him with a question about paying taxes. They asked a ridiculous question about the resurrection of the dead and multiple marriages. Jesus met every challenge with wisdom and power- and the leaders just got angrier and angrier.

Finally, at the end of this long day, Jesus and his disciples leave the temple and again he tells them that this indestructible building will be reduced to rubble. Those who first heard Mark's Gospel were living that reality. Less than a generation after Jesus sat on those massive stones, they, along with the holy city would be destroyed.

The last thing he tells them on Tuesday night is, "*Keep awake.*"

It was morning and it was evening. The third day.

On Tuesday we see the power of God on the loose in the world through Jesus in ways that threaten human power structures. Jesus' identity and authority are no secret to Mark's readers. It is right there in the very first sentence, chapter one, verse one. "*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*"

It is clear to us, as readers, and it was clear to some who heard him preach and saw his healing miracles. But for those who didn't want to know, Jesus' identity as the Son of God, remained a secret. Those blinded by arrogance, pride, and hunger for power saw nothing to gain in acknowledging the authority that belonged to him. And if, in fact, he really was who he said he was, they had everything to lose.

It was on the Tuesday
That he let them have it.

If you had been there you would have thought
they truly wanted to know.
You would have thought they

only had the best of intentions.

After all, they were respectable men
Influential men
The establishment.

They wanted to know what right he had
and they wanted to know right now.

They knew the answer already...
Or so they thought,
Otherwise they would never have asked the question.

The question they asked was absurd.
So he asked them one they couldn't possibly answer.
And they knew it.

Like most of us
They were looking for an argument
with no intention of a change of heart.

So he asked them a question.

And that was on the Tuesday...
That day when he let them...
Let us...
Have it. (1)

Amen.

End Notes:

- Adapted from STAGES ON THE WAY: WORSHIP RESOURCES FOR LENT, HOLY WEEK, AN