

SYMBOLS FROM THE PASSION WEEK

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Text: Mark 11:1-10

INTRODUCTION: One of the serendipitous aspects of teaching in college is that quite often I would discover something new as I prepared my lectures. Toward the end of my teaching career one semester while I was looking at the Passion Week, the last week in the ministry of Jesus, I suddenly realized how many "symbols" were present in the stories; Common, ordinary things that appeared in our daily lives were included in so many of the events that were described in the Gospels: everything from trees to coins to animals collectively seemed to play a prominent role in understanding what was taking place, or in interpreting what Jesus was trying to teach his followers and others that he encountered.

Today, I am simply going to look at many of those "symbols" and try to interpret what they mean in our understanding of the good news that has come our way in the person of Jesus. Hopefully, you will more clearly recognize the significance of these small, often unnoticed contributors to our understanding of the Passion Week of the Gospel.

I. Overview of the Passion Week

A. *Palm Sunday* - entry of Jesus into Jerusalem - background - time of the Passover, pilgrims from throughout the Roman Empire to celebrate God's deliverance of his people from Egypt under Moses

B. *Monday* - Jesus cleanses the temple

C. *Tuesday* - Jesus responds to interrogators; he caustically condemns the scribes and the Pharisees for their failed leadership of the people; he laments over the failure of the people of Jerusalem to follow his leading and blames the religious leaders; he affirms the contribution of the widow in the widow's mites story; he teaches about the "last days"; and a surprising anointing with expensive oil by Mary, the sister of Martha, takes place in Bethany

D. *Thursday* - the Last Supper, the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane; the arrest of Jesus; his trial at night before the Sanhedrin, and the betrayal of Peter before the night ends

E. *Friday* - Jesus appears before Pontius Pilate, turned over to the soldiers for execution, and is crucified; he then is buried in the newly-cut tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

F. *The Sabbath*

G. *The Resurrection* takes place.

H. *The Passion Week* is an incredibly busy, full, and eventful week.

II. Symbols of the Passion Week

A. *Symbols related to trees and wood* - it is so interesting how trees and wood play some a prominent role in the last week, and how each mention conveys a different meaning

1. *Leafy branches* - thrown into the path of Jesus as he enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey. The people are so excited, so expectant. Could this Jesus of Nazareth, this prophet, be the long-awaited Messiah who would deliver the Jewish people from the foreign oppressor once more, and establish anew God's kingdom and the kingdom of his people. And why the leafy palm branches? I have a few old copper coins, widow's mites they are called, and on the back are three branches. The *branches symbolize Jewish nationalism* and express the hopes of the people for the establishment of God's kingdom. The branches identify Jesus with that hope as the crowds gather in exuberant expectation.

2. *The curse on the barren fig tree* is a very interesting story. On the next day, according to Matthew Jesus and his followers pass a barren fig tree. Interestingly, Mark, the earliest

Gospel, says that it was not the season for figs. However, Jesus uses the tree as an example of the barrenness of the religious leaders. They promised fruit but did not deliver, and therefore were worthy only to be condemned. There may well be a lesson, or a warning for all of us, who engage in ministry to examine whether we are producing fruit, or not.

3. ***Garden of Gethsemane*** - a symbol of solitude and searching. There are old, twisted olive trees there, probably like there would have been during the time of Jesus. They provide a place for retreat, prayer, and self-examination.

4. ***"Clubs and staves" used in the arrest in Gethsemane*** - Wood can be used for lots of things. While in the garden the guard of the chief priest, the scribes and the elders - all religious leaders - showed up armed to the hilt. Why do religious leaders need to be armed with clubs and staves? In the case the wood symbolized violence, misguided power, and evil intentions.

5. A ***"crown of thorns"*** is a symbol of mockery, false adoration, and false reverence. In the eyes of the soldiers, who failed to understand the one that they were taunting, and the world, what kind of king was this Jesus. Even Pilate raised the question "Are you the king of the Jews," as he looked upon who seemed to be a rather pathetic figure.

6. ***Jesus speaks to the women of the "green wood and the dry wood."*** - As Jesus makes his way toward crucifixion he encounters some women by the street who are weeping. He forewarns them of the violence that is to come because of those who choose revolution to try and overthrow Rome. He rhetorically asks "If they do this - if they put an innocent man to death - if they do this to the green wood - then think what they will surely do to the dry wood, to the wood that is ready to ignite in flames. His warning went unheeded. The Jewish Zealots revolted in A.D. 67, and in A.D. 70 Jerusalem was overthrown by the Roman army and destroyed. The dry wood perished in the destruction.

7. ***The cross of crucifixion*** - Perhaps there is no symbol from a tree, from wood, that is more evident in Western history than that of the cross. I remember the old hymn "The Old Rugged Cross," the emblem of suffering and shame." What was seen in the eyes of the Roman world of the first century as the most demeaning form of death, crucifixion, has turned into a symbol of love and sacrifice, and of victory over death through the eyes of faith, through the understanding of believers for 2,000 years.

Concluding thoughts on wood - so, when we think of leaves and trees and wood during the Passion Week, we are reminded of optimistic nationalism, failed religion, human violence, mockery, the consequences of revolution, and shame turned into victory.

B. Symbols related to animals

1. ***The donkey*** - Jesus rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on this lowly beast of burden. Matthew, who is writing to Jewish-Christians, tells us that this act is a fulfillment of a prophesy in Zechariah 9:9, which speaks of a humble king who enters Jerusalem in peace riding on a donkey. This king, this Jesus, comes not as a military conqueror or an authoritative king but as one whose kingdom abhors violence and demands justice.

2. ***Serpents*** - "you serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?" Snakes have not had a very good reputation in the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition - sneaky, slimy, slithery, poisonous - snakes and serpents spell trouble and are to be condemned. Jesus identifies the scribes and the Pharisees with the symbol of snakes. They deceived the people with their poisonous and pious attitudes. They are to be avoided and they stand to be condemned

3. ***The mother hen*** - Jesus used this symbol to express his concern over Jerusalem and his desire to protect the people. He wept because the city would not listen. "How often I would have gathered you under my wing, like a mother hen does her chicks, but you would not."

4. ***The rooster*** - a symbol of betrayal for Peter - the betrayal was unintentional, unlike that of Judas, it was momentary, but it was betrayal. And yet, Luke provides hope for Peter, when Jesus says to this zealous disciple, "When you have returned, strengthen the brethren." Possibly the rooster could also symbolize a new beginning, a new hope even for Peter.

C. ***Coins and money*** - it is so interesting how money and coins come into play during the Passion Week. And, again the symbols can represent good or bad.

1. ***The money-changers and the sellers of sacrificial animals*** - If there was an event that I would have enjoyed observing, it was when Jesus overthrew the tables of the money-changers and the sellers of the sacrificial animals. I can see all kinds of money and all kinds of animals flying into the courtyard, observed by an amazed and puzzled group of entrepreneurs shocked to see their sources of income being so abused. In this case, their money was a symbol of greed and corruption.

2. ***The coin used for taxes to Caesar*** - This may be one of the most important stories of the last week when it comes to understanding how believers should respond to the world, and especially to government, even when it is pagan. Jesus takes a coin used to pay a poll tax for the support of a pagan government and uses it to teach friends and foes that believers can be good citizens of earthly kingdom and God's kingdom at the same time.

3. ***The widow's mites*** - This story uses two small copper coins to teach us the distinction between quality giving and quantity giving. In an act of selflessness, a poor widow gives from her heart and not her abundance, and uses her coins to symbolize a depth of commitment not always seen in larger gifts. Jesus understood and taught that one who has so little can give so much.

4. ***Thirty pieces of silver*** - This story conveys the price of loyalty, or is it betrayal. Judas may have had a deeper motive in betraying Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, but once the deed was done, it was too late. In the end, he tried to return the "blood money," but the deed was done. We are told that he bought a field to be used as a burial place for the poor, little consolation for betraying his master.

D. ***The symbols of tombs and burial places*** - Speaking of burial places, it is surprising how often this symbol appears during the Last Week.

1. ***White-washed sepulchers*** - In his caustic condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees Jesus referred to the white-washed sepulchers to symbolize the failure of the religious leaders. They looked really pretty and nice on the outside. But on the inside they were filled with dead men's bones! The Pharisees were so concerned about religious defilement. They practically sterilized their cups before drinking, yet it was their lives that were sterile when it came to helping the people in their religious commitments.

2. ***The potter's field*** - This burial place, as previously indicated, represented the poverty of the life of Judas. His failure was the betrayal of the one who could bring meaning to his existence, yet in the end the only gain from his efforts was the acquisition of a place to bury the dead.

3. ***The newly-cut tomb*** - The tomb provided by Joseph of Arimathea should have symbolized the final chapter in the life of this great teacher from Nazareth. But in the end, it wound up empty, symbolizing the hope for all who would believe in the one who could not be held in this tomb.

E. ***Other symbols***

1. ***Precious oils*** - Mary and the surprise anointing at Bethany and the oils and spices provided by Nicodemus to prepare the body of Jesus for burial symbolized the death and the sacrifice that Jesus was about to make for all of humanity. And they symbolized the unique royalty of one who earned his kingship as he laid down his life to give life.

2. ***Bread and wine*** - They symbolize his voluntary death in order that we might have life, and life more abundantly. Broken bread and out-poured wine represented the sacrificial giving of his very life for all who believe.

3. ***Garments and a royal robe*** - The bed sheet of a young man in the Garden of Gethsemane, caught up in the events of the moment, curious, frightened. The bed sheet symbolized his curiosity to know more about Jesus, to be a part of what was happening, and a lack of courage under fire.

The garment of Jesus and the royal robe used at his trial by the soldiers symbolized a misunderstanding of the nature and ministry of Jesus. He was a king, but one whose kingdom was not of

this world but was a spiritual kingdom, a kingdom built upon love and sacrifice, not violence and power. The man defined the garment, not the other way around.

4. *Linen garments for burial* - These garments should have symbolized the end of the story. Instead when set aside they symbolized a new beginning, a resurrected body, and a promise for all.

CONCLUSIONS: Today, look around and observe all of the symbols in this place and in your life. The pulpit, the communion table, the cross, the open Bible, the offering plate, and on and on. They represent loyalties, contradictions, failures, and hopes.

What is the symbol of your faith in Christ? What are the symbols in you life that identify to others who you are in terms of your commitments? When people see your symbols in the ordinary things of your life, what message do they perceive.