

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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Proper 21, Year A *Matthew 21:23-32*

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.¹ *Amen.*

In the photograph, the massive tree, its wide canopy still green, lays motionless on its side.² The camera exposes the healthy interior of its sawed trunk, and, if we could lean close enough, I expect we could account the varying widths of its three-hundred rings, that survivor's testimony to floods and droughts, wars and fires, enriching springs, snowy winters, and so many seasons between. A forensic investigator in mask and gloves – not for COVID protection on this day, but for securing a crime scene – crouches at the side of its stump, almost kneeling. Stones from Hadrian's Wall lead from the foreground to beyond the image's frame, rubble bearing its own witness to humankind's ambition, our ancient aches for power and possession. And now this new injury to natural beauty and the common good.

Little doubt you will have seen news of the iconic sycamore felled last Wednesday in Northumberland, England. Set in a valley among rolling hills, the tree offered an identity – a symbol of place – for the people of its nearby communities. And more than only a feature-film appearance,³ an unknown number of pilgrims visited this tree over its centuries of life. This weekend, we have heard stories of those who proposed marriage to their beloved there, who cast ashes of their dead there, who found wonder there – wonder in this world too often choked of it.⁴ Yet, according to the BBC, yesterday “remain[ed] incredibly solemn. People [continued] to walk [to the site] to pay their respects, taking time to stand or sit looking at what remains.”

An ocean away, this morning we conclude our three-week sermon series focusing on our care of God's creation, and we join in their procession.

As we make our way, consider the Gospel of Matthew's rising tensions. This chapter begins with Jesus entering Jerusalem, his hardscrabble followers shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David!”⁵ As they approach, the Evangelist suggests, “the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’”⁶ Jesus then enters the temple, where the offerings apparatus had begun trafficking blind eyes rather than righteous hearts. Pressing this infidelity, Jesus “[drives] out all who were selling and buying ... and he [overturns] the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold doves, [saying to those he confronted], ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers.’”⁷

This confrontation is theological and physical ... personal and political ... Jesus crawls into the leaders' pockets; he needles under their skin.

After these very public displays, Jesus [perhaps wisely] spends the night out of town in Bethany,⁸ but he reenters Jerusalem the very next day.⁹ Upon this second entry, the religious leadership have had enough of the zealot. They stoke the surrounding crowds until the temple crackles with menace. As described in the opening verse of today's Gospel, the "chief priests and elders of the people" approach Jesus while he teaches.¹⁰

Significantly, in this confrontation the leaders neither counter the disciples' claim of Jesus as "the one who comes in the name of the Lord,"¹¹ nor do they challenge Jesus' condemnation of the sacrificial system. Instead, they play to the crowd and challenge Jesus' credibility: "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"¹²

This is classic misdirection politics: if you can't win on the issues, then *avoid the issues* ... and if you don't want to hear the prophecy, then *attack the prophet*.

I am among those countless who have loved special trees: for me, the corner magnolia at Gina-and-Sir's, its low branches and waxy leaves sheltering an imaginative realm;¹³ the sprawling oak at Granny's, its boughs perfectly made for cousins' climbing and sitting and swinging; resilient mottes in Texas, offering welcome shade from otherwise relentless heat. Trees stand as these miracles of endurance beyond our creation or control: signs of the world that preceded us, reassurances of the world that will follow us. And as one who has trimmed and felled my share,¹⁴ the willfulness required to take down that English sycamore shakes me. Unless someone drove a beastly machine to the site, a tree that size would require at least two people sustaining enormous effort for no short stretch.

Madness or meanness, questions remain about motive. On Thursday and Friday, police arrested a sixteen-year-old and a sixty-year-old in connection to the crime. The county code lists the offense as "Criminal Damage," though the actions seem far worse than that misdemeanor title.¹⁵

Regardless of what we may learn of the transgressors and their intention, they are not prophets – yet, for us to focus exclusively on either the villainy or the villains indulges a spiritual misdirection, nonetheless. So many of us have reacted with deep feelings *because we see ourselves exposed along with that venerable trunk*. And with our civilization dissected, we see with awful clarity our gluttony, our viciousness, and our complicity in the abuse of the earth.

Back in Jerusalem, Jesus sees through the Pharisees' distraction.¹⁶ He responds, "I will also ask you one question; and if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"¹⁷

Recall that the Temple leaders then argue with one another: “If we say, ‘From Heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him.’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ [then] we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.”¹⁸ Hagglng for a response, they conspire to say, “We do not know.”¹⁹

The chief priests and elders do not discuss what might be true; they do not trouble themselves with what might be best; they do not ask what might be holy. Instead, they take Jesus’ bait and double-down on their refusal of self-reflection. They ignore his prophecy. They strategize how to avoid acknowledging either Jesus or his cousin as legitimate. And looking to stay out of trouble with the restless crowds, they show concern only for themselves – their “We don’t know” standing as a cop-out of *epic* proportion.

See, the leaders feel Jesus’ credibility in their bones – that’s why they ask about it – and everything about him threatens the brokenness they recognize in themselves. Yet, rather than seeking either the redemption of their sin or the healing of their hurts, they guard their sores ... they protect their woundedness. In response, Jesus charges at their unfaithfulness and the systems that perpetuate it.

So, too, does Jesus make a run at the hardness of my heart ... and your heart ... the heart of the Church, and the broken heart of this world in which we live. And if we will not first grapple our own sin and sickness, then our social-media outrages and kitchen-table indignations are only more Pharisaic misdirections.

For while we prefer the narrative of the Sycamore Gap tree as a senseless act, our appetites make its felling more inevitable than unnecessary.

By externalizing blame for that horror, we join with the temple leadership and protect our own culpability. Failing to take those spiritual dynamics seriously and personally, **our hands stay on the saw** – and *we* respond to Jesus’ outreach, “We do not know, Lord ... Lord, we do not know.”

British authorities report the “stump was ‘healthy’ and [officials] might be able to coppice the tree” ... *coppice*, “a [Strong-Age] technique that involves felling a tree at its base to create a stump, known as the “stool,” where new shoots ... regrow from dormant buds[, creating] a dense stand of multi-stemmed trees.”²⁰

“Mark Feather, estate manager at the Woodland Trust” – the UK’s largest conservation organization – acknowledged that this process would “take a few years to develop into even a small tree [and] 150 to 200 years before it [would become anything] close to what we have lost.

“Once a tree of this age has gone,” he explained, “the sad truth is [we] can’t replace [it] within any visible timeframe. It takes centuries.”²¹

While a sobering truth, do not miss the Good News of Feather’s acknowledgement: what has been torn down, *can be raised up* again. And – thanks be to God! – we Christians have been made for such faith-filled ministry:

We shouted “Hosanna” as Jesus entered Jerusalem, and still we process to “pay our respects” to the world’s suffering, to walk beside “what remains,” and to make our “Alleluia!” even if at the grave.

Likewise, we Christians constantly commit ourselves to labors that will not be realized “within a visible timeframe,” devotions that can seem foolish in a world driven by sooner gratifications, yet remain God’s great hope.

And we can do all this because Jesus has run toward our ravaged lives, not to salt our rended hearts, but to heal them! To renew them! To transform them!

Of course, we ache before a healing we know will demand centuries of care and, even then, will remain a fulfillment beyond our control. *No matter.* We must start where we are – in our relationship to the earth, in our relationship with God, in our relationships with one another – bearing the light and love, mercy and grace, that God has shined upon us.

With faith and hope,
I pray that we would be such companions in this household of God,
Amen.

¹ From Psalm 31.

² “[Sycamore Gap Tree At Hadrian’s Wall Cut Down By ‘Vandals’](#).” I sourced all these articles from [the BBC](#).

³ 1991’s *Robinhood: Prince Of Thieves*, as noted in many articles about the tree.

⁴ “[Sycamore Gap: ‘We Are Devastated – It’s So Sad To See The Tree Gone’](#).” These stories are bittersweet.

⁵ Matthew 21:9.

⁶ Matthew 21:10.

⁷ Matthew 21:12, 13.

⁸ Matthew 21:17.

⁹ Matthew 21:18-23. Jesus hangrily curses that poor fig tree along the way.

¹⁰ Matthew 21:23. [I imagine it as Warriors vs. Punks](#).

¹¹ Matthew 21:9.

¹² Matthew 21:23.

¹³ Most often, the Dagobah System.

¹⁴ Mostly taking down dead trees and “cedars” in Texas, those invasive water hogs that strangle native plantlife.

¹⁵ [“Sycamore Gap: Man In His 60s Held After Hadrian’s Wall Tree Cut Down.”](#)

¹⁶ Matthew 21:45 identifies the leaders as “the chief priests and the Pharisees.”

¹⁷ Matthew 21:24-25a.

¹⁸ Matthew 21:25b-26.

¹⁹ Matthew 21:27.

²⁰ [“Sycamore Gap: Cut Down Tree Could Regrow Shoots, Experts Say.”](#)

²¹ Ibid.