

Leafless trees raise no expectations

As Jesus and his disciples leave the upturned tables of the temple, they pass the fig tree that Jesus cursed on his way into the temple. Not unexpectedly, the fig tree has withered. Later in Mark, chapter 13, we'll hear about a fig tree again, one that has learned "its lesson." So what's up with fig trees?

Naturally, the fig is more than a fruit filling for a delicious cookie. In the Old Testament, the fig is presented as a symbol of the nation of Israel. When Jesus enters the temple and sees the fig tree, his disdain is not for the barren tree but for a nation unready to receive its savior. The people of Israel know the laws by rote but not by heart, and Jesus's frustration mounts.

In chapter 12, we read one of the under-est of understatement: "Then he began to speak to them in parables." Jesus tries every which way to explain the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven to the disciples. These parables of stories and situations familiar to the people of the time offer life-giving lessons about the truth of God's love, mercy, and grace. We encounter some familiar passages. For instance, the verse, "the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," is a favorite among capital campaigns (and even etched on the building which houses my son's gym). Later, we hear the story of the widow's mite, the woman who gave all she had—two small copper coins—and in so doing, "put in more than all those who are contributing to the charity." In these passages, Jesus juggles his teachings with the incessant, toddler-like questioning from the religious authorities. Intent on tripping Jesus into misspeaking or heresy, they ask him questions that would require a normal person to do linguistic gymnastics. Do we pay taxes to the emperor—or not? If a woman marries seven brothers, whose wife will she be in the resurrection, they ask. And finally, the ultimate question: "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answers with words simple in phrasing and profound with implication: Love the Lord God with all your heart...and love your neighbor as yourself. This is indeed the chief cornerstone of the faith.

In chapter 13, we encounter what scholars call the Olivet Discourse. The reason: Jesus is talking to his disciples on the Mount of Olives. All three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) contain this conversation, which is rife with apocalyptic language. Jesus warns of coming destruction, of brother betraying brother, of persecution and suffering. The scholarship is divided about events Jesus is discussing. Is he foreshadowing the destruction of the temple, which will occur in 70 CE, or do his words foretell the second coming of Christ? Whether the great tribulation

predicted by Jesus occurred in the first century or in the time to come, Jesus reminds us that no one, “neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son,” but the Father knows. Until that time, whenever it may be, Jesus says to us all: “Keep awake.”