



Sermon Transcription • Abbotsford

The Mean Miracle - (Mark 11)

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[Please Note: This transcript has been lightly edited for ease of reading. Also, some headings have been added in square brackets to aid the reader in locating portions of the sermon.]

This morning we are beginning a new sermon series; last summer we did something called, *Preacher's Choice*, and we wanted to do something similar this summer but with the slightly different twist that we're calling, *Stranger Things*. Now some of you recognize this from the popular TV show on Netflix and some of you are quite happy to know that apparently a season three is coming out; and if you haven't seen it, it's a show that is strange you know, it's this mystery that's taking place in the '80's. So it's a good mix, right - strange, mystery, '80's - like Scooby-doo. [Laughter] So this is kind of the theme that we're going with - is asking, you know what is strange in the Bible that we could look at today and really unpack and to see what is God actually teaching there. I mean have you ever had one of those moments, church, where you're reading your Bible and you just come across something you're like I have no idea why that's there. Well as I was looking for a passage this morning I went online and I just was doing some Google searching and looking to see - okay what are people talking about: what is a passage that seems to be confusing people? And as I did that this one passage just came up over, and over again particularly from the New Testament - many people referred to it as one of the strangest passages in the New Testament and one person said that it is unquestionably the most baffling Jesus moment. And I thought okay that's perfect, let's go with that. So if you have your Bible turn with me, we are in Mark 11. Mark 11, I'm going to be starting in verse 12. Here's what we read, that Jesus is leaving Bethany - it tells us - and that Jesus was hungry, now Mark 11:13-14,

"Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' And his disciples heard him say it."

So here Jesus *curses* this fig tree, his disciples hear it and now dropping down to Mark 11:20-21 we find out,

"In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, 'Rabbi [which is the word teacher, Teacher], look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!'"

"You done killed it, Jesus," is basically what he said. I don't know if you've ever come across that passage before and you're like, I don't understand what is going on there at all; like is Jesus just having a bad day? Like how hungry was he, you know? You know - does Jesus not like fig trees? You



know it's just one of those random things in the Bible? Or you know there's some people that think, okay this must be symbolic, maybe Jesus is cursing the Romans, or maybe he's cursing the Jews, or maybe he's cursing Christians that don't have figs, or that aren't fruitful. And I want to tell you that in fact all of those are wrong. He's actually teaching something very specific, quite profound, and incredibly convicting. One of the things I hope that you've seen though as you've come to Northview over the years, and as we've opened the Bible together, is that when we come across something that we don't understand that it's a reminder to us that we need to make sure that we're taking in the full context - we're looking at the big picture of what's going on. That's true by the way of not just the Bible but our own lives, isn't it? When you come across something that you don't understand that's mysterious or strange you're like - well I got to fill in the picture here, I need to understand what's going on. I was reminded of this in my own life particularly with regards to plants the older that I have gotten.

Now I remember when I first started dating Nancy I met her parents, and I met her father, and I remember being taken into the backyard where he was; and my father-in-law is one of the greatest gardeners that I have ever seen and his backyard is like the Garden of Eden, I mean it is incredible. And when I first met Nancy I didn't fully appreciate his abilities, but the older I've gotten I have had a strange attraction to hanging baskets, men do you know what I'm talking about - [laughter] some of you know what I'm saying - all of a sudden plants are looking really good. And I'm starting to love me some hanging baskets, but the problem is hanging baskets don't love me. I have killed more hanging baskets than I can tell you. I've killed a lot of potted plants too and I couldn't figure this thing out, so I began to talk to my father-in-law; I mean he knows plants. The first thing he asked me of course is, "Andy do you water it?" I'm like, "Sometimes." [Laughter] "That's a problem!" Listen, hanging baskets need lots of water I've found out. So then I started watering them regularly and I'm watering my potted plants. I water them regularly - still dying. And I come to my father-in-law again, I'm like, "They're still dying." And he goes, "Well you want to know my secret to gardening?" I'm like, "Yes!!" He goes, "I'll tell you - I'll show you." He walks me over to his garden and there in his garden there is some wood that's on top of something - so he takes this wood off and they're some tarps under there, he opens those tarps back and he's got - he's got a garden with tarps full of poop. I've never seen anything like it, it was one of the strangest things - I've never seen somebody do that before. And then I begin to think to myself, where did you get all that poop? Like you don't even have an animal. I couldn't help myself but ask, I'm like, you know, "Dad, should I be concerned?" He's like, "No, no, no, listen I got my sources." And I'm like, "Okay." You don't prod too far, right? Apparently he's got some farmer, right and he donates; and I didn't realize this by the way, I knew that you needed to age cheese and wine, I had no idea you have to age poop to make fertilizer. And I'm looking at that and it's not looking so gross anymore, right? That's looking like vintage, fertilizer right there, I need to get my hands on some of that, right? So now I'm watering, I'm fertilizing, and I'm *still* killing my plants. And now at this point my father-in-law is like - he's so annoyed from hearing me constantly bemoaning me killing yet another plant that he comes over to my house; I'm getting a consult here, right, and he's looking at my plants. And you can only imagine by the way what my neighbours have watched over the years right as I have wept and yelled at my plants in front of my yard that are dying on me; and you know he comes up to this pot and I'd already taken the plant out and he flips the thing upside down - and church would you believe it, in there there is a plug!



There's a plug and you actually have to remove that plug; cause I didn't realize this, you can not water your plants but you can actually *overwater* your plants. I was drowning my plants year after year - apparently roots need to breath. And I'm looking at that going, "You've got to be kidding me! Like why would they put a plug in there!" [Laughter] Pull the plug out, and I'm happy to tell you this summer finally here is my bougainvillea in my front yard that I dearly love, [clapping] yeah thank you, I appreciate the claps. <laughs> Finally it's healthy - mystery solved.

[The Gospel of Mark]

As we go to the Bible this morning we going to solve this plant mystery. We need to take in the full context, we need to see what's going on here. And if I were just to give you one piece of advice - you know over the last 16 years of reading and preaching from God's Word - if I were to say listen what's the one thing that I've really learned. You know and more than just context, you know, making sure you're reading above that strange passage and below that strange passage right, to get the full view. You know read the whole chapter, not just the verse. You know read the whole book not just the chapter. Read the whole Bible, right? You know more than that, one of the things that I've learned, is I've had to remind myself that often you and I go to the Bible with an assumption, at least I do. Often when I read particularly the New Testament and the Gospels, I often have the assumption that Mark in this case, John Mark, who wasn't an eyewitness by the way to Jesus but most likely is getting his account from Peter - is writing to you, not what he remembers - notice this, but what he's wanting you to remember. He's not writing to you what he knows, he's writing to you what he wants *you* to know. See this is the big difference. You see Mark could've written a much longer, much broader, gospel than he did. John tells us this by the way at the end of his gospel, he says I could've written much, much more; I could have written books full, but I've written what I want you to know. That changes the way you read it, because now when I come to the Scriptures and I find something that seems strange, I put a question mark on it and I ask myself, "Why did Mark include that?" See he's not just writing something, he's *purposely* writing it. Why is it there? That begins to change the way you read your Bible. Now let's take a look at this context and see, okay why did Mark choose to include this - which by the way Matthew does as well.

[Jesus is Messiah]

Now if we go up to the beginning of Mark 11, and we start in verse 1, what we see is that the broader context is that Jesus has been in Bethany. Bethany is where Lazarus lives, and he's been staying at his home - more than that Jesus has gone there to bring Lazarus back from the dead. He performs an incredible miracle that no one had ever seen like that, and there is buzz amongst Jerusalem at this time about what he's just done - that people are talking about this. More than that, the context of where we are in the Bible, is that this is the time of Passover, this is the week leading into Passover. So you have to understand Jerusalem is jam, packed at this point with people from all over the nations that are coming to worship at the temple. And we find ourselves with Jesus coming to Jerusalem, and he has instructed his disciples that they are to go to the village ahead and that there would be a colt there waiting for them to bring. Now you need to understand by the way, I don't think this is a miracle.



I think Jesus, who's been in this area, I think this is something he's arranged - he's arranged it. The disciples go, they talk with the owner, everything's cool, they bring it back; and we're reading now in Mark 11:7-8,

"When they brought [chapter 11, verse 7, when they brought] the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields."

What's taking place here is really significant. Jesus is coming into Jerusalem as the Messiah. Now this is something that Mark has written about and has been bringing to our attention throughout the Gospel, and in particular in Mark 8, Jesus asks his disciples - who do people say that I am? And Peter says, "Well Jesus, you know people are saying that you're all sorts of things," but Peter says, "But you're the Messiah." Now that word, messiah is significant. Messiah is Hebrew and it gets translated into the Greek is Christ - so when we say Jesus Christ we're saying Jesus Messiah. In the Hebrew the word messiah means, anointed one - literally, smeared one, somebody who's been smeared with oil. That's significant in the Jewish context, it kind of confuses us, but cause in our context under a British monarchy we're used to a king being crowned. But for a Jew, a king was smeared with oil, so a messiah was the king. And so what we're beginning to see is as Mark is explaining to you who this Jesus is and what kind of messiah is he - he is a king, messiah. And as he comes in to Jerusalem - and remember there is a buzz about this guy who brought somebody back from the dead - and now he's sitting on a colt, like the kings of old would have done, as they come into Jerusalem and they receive him as a king, Mark 11:9,

"Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, 'Hosanna!' [means, save us] 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' 'Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!' 'Hosanna in the highest heaven!'" [Save us, Jesus!]"

As he comes as a king into a land occupied by Rome, and under Roman control. They are looking to Jesus as their Saviour. Now in verse 11, Mark tells us some important information as well that's going to make more sense in a moment. In Mark 11:11,

"Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything [that's going to be key], but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve."

So he's with his disciples, he comes into Jerusalem, comes into the Temple that is a buzz with people there for Passover, and he's looking around at everything that's going on - and I'm sure that there is no where to stay in Jerusalem with how many people are there - so he goes back out to Lazarus' home most likely, staying in Bethany. Okay that's the first day.

Now we come into the second day in Mark 11:12 when it says,

"The next day as they were leaving Bethany [and now Jesus is coming back to Jerusalem and it says that he's], hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf."

Now I went to go visit my father-in-law on Friday and I was talking to him about this passage and it just so happens that I told him about this he brought me over, in his garden, to a fig tree! Like he's got



everything back there! I didn't even know you can grow a fig tree in Canada but he has done it - you know if you got the fertilizer he's got going anything will grow back there right? So he's got this fig tree - now this one looks like I cursed it, okay but this once was alive, alright? And he began to explain to me how fig trees work and this made a lot of sense with what I had read as well and what I knew about fig trees, and that is that fig trees, in the winter, lose all their leaves, but at about March they gain their leaves and they look beautiful, so they're just in full leaf. But where we find ourselves in the story is in April. At April time though, this is where this tree would begin to blossom and fig trees have a unique blossom that forms right behind the leaf. And that blossom is actually edible and in fact many people in the Middle East enjoy eating those. And so as Jesus comes to a fig tree that's in full leaf, in mid-April, it's exactly the time that you'd expect to find that blossom that in fact you could eat; but more than that now Jesus is explaining to us, and we're seeing, that when - and you and I are used to this - when you see a blossom on a tree you know that it is a sign that that tree is going to bear fruit. Now that blossom falls off and a fig will form where that leaf was and the leaf falls off and you just have the fruit. So as Jesus comes to this fig tree, he's looking to find these blossoms. And he's not seeing any blossoms. What he's seeing is a tree that looks beautiful, it's got lots of leaves, it has every indication that it's going to bear fruit, but in fact it's not, upon inspection it doesn't have these blossoms that tell you that it's going to bear fruit. And *then* he curses it.

Now I got to tell you by the way this makes a lot of sense to me in just my own context. Growing up in Portland my mom had a pear tree, an apple tree, and a cherry tree; and every year that apple tree - you knew it was going to have apples and that I'd have to go out there and clean them up, because it had blossoms that are forming, many of you are used to that. With our pear tree though, and our cherry tree it was anybody's guess whether or not that year it was going to have fruit on it or not. It was very inconsistent, but we would always know because those blossoms would be forming. And as Jesus is looking at this tree and as he curses this tree that doesn't have blossoms, that's not going to bear fruit, a question that comes to our mind is - well why did he do that?

[Jesus is a Prophet Messiah]

Now one of the things that Mark is beginning to do, is it's kind of like a microscope - you know in a microscope you got different lenses that you can switch and you can take a different perspective, you know by looking even closer at the object. Mark is doing something very similar so he's first told you that Jesus is a King, Messiah - right? We see that, but now he's starting to change this lense and we're starting to see that Jesus is more than just a King Messiah, he is a Prophet Messiah. Now a Jew - what you have to understand is the Jews are watching this, in particular the Jewish leaders - they are not confused by what Jesus is doing. They understand what he is doing very clearly. A Jew understood that a prophecy wasn't just told, a prophet, when a prophet told a prophecy, it wasn't just something they said, it was something they acted out. We see this throughout the Old Testament - prophecies are acted out, and we also see that fig trees are often used in prophecies. Hosea 9, we also see this in Micah 7, this idea of a fig tree and being used and used in the idea of prophecy. So we can see then that Jesus is behaving as a prophet and he's using this fig tree in that way, the question really becomes: okay well Jesus what are you doing? What are you seeking to communicate by



cursing this fig tree? Now this becomes very clear in what happens next. Okay in Mark 11:15 now after this fig tree's been cursed, we're in 15,

"[Jesus now,] On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. [Now this is another, often misunderstood passage. In the years that I've pastored, I'd say this is probably one that I've seen come up the most where Christians are really unsure of whether or not you should buy and sell anything at church because Jesus seems to be really bothered by what's going on here. And as we begin to see this, what you begin to realize is Jesus isn't bothered by the buying and selling that's going on in the temple - that's *normal*, that's temple practice, that's what was involved in the sacrificial system, and more than that, Jesus goes in and he begins to] overturned [we read] the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves."

Now just to put this into context - at this time as they're preparing for Passover, as Jews are coming from around the nations and it is full of people - Jewish males need to come and they need to pay the temple tax. It's something they did once a year. Now they're coming from all over the nations with their own currencies and so they're going to need to convert that currency into *temple* currency. So there was only one currency that was authorized by the temple and that wasn't unique by the way, you see the Romans, when they conquered a people they did not allow them to mint their own coins. And so instead these Jews have to use Roman coins and they seek to use a coin that they find the least detestable. Many of these have all sorts of signs or writing on them that just is a reminder that they are under Roman occupation. But the coin that they chose is a coin that instead of referring to Rome, it instead refers to Baal and the god of Baal - and so you could almost imagine as Jesus is coming in and he's flipping this over and he's angry, we read that it doesn't even gain the attention of the temple guard. Like clearly, I'm sure some Jews were even sympathetic to Jesus and going, yeah Jesus we know, we're upset about this too that we're under Roman occupation right? But there's nothing we can do, but we're looking for that Messiah right. We're looking for that king that will lead us, are you that king - Jesus? Are you that messiah? But now notice what he does next. In Mark 11:16,

"And [he would not, Jesus] would not allow anyone to carry merchandise [now the Greek word there is vessel, would not allow any to carry a vessel] through the temple courts."

Now what a vessel was, was a container in which you had your religious - different aspects of what you would need for religious practice in the temple such as; oil for the lamp, incense to burn, bread, and you begin to see that what Jesus is doing is, he is stopping temple worship in its entirety. People aren't participating in the sacrificial system, he's stopping it. And then he begins to teach them, and this is where Jesus really hones in on what he's doing and what he's teaching and what it is that he's cursing with the fig tree. Okay, Jesus as he's teaching in Mark 11:17 says,

"Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'?"

Now the Jews that are listening, they understand - listen, they are well read in their Scriptures and they know Jesus is quoting from Isaiah 56 in which Isaiah explains that the temple was meant to be a place of worship for all people. It was supposed to be for both the Gentiles and the Jews, but the temple had become a place of segregation. It was segregated in that there was a place where the Gentiles



could come but they could come no further; as you went into the temple it segregated the Jews from one another, from the male and female. As you went even farther into the temple it separated Jews from one another for those who were priests not priests; and as you go into it's inner courts you see that it's separated the Jews from God himself. It had become a temple of segregation, and Jesus is saying listen, my house was meant to be a house of prayer for all people. But what have you done with it? Well he says, Mark 11:17,

“But you have made it “a den of robbers.””

Now this is, this is one of those passages that sometimes gets confused as well cause people think it refers back to the money and that people must be stealing from each other and again it's the money that he's upset about. No, notice what is a den of robbers? A den of robbers is not where the thieving is happening, that's not where people are lying and cheating, that's where people go to hide after they've done the lying and the cheating and the stealing. Right? It's supposed to be a place of refuge and safety. Note - and Jesus again is quoting from Scripture and they know and they understand, Jesus is referring back to Jeremiah 7, and this is significant - I want to read this for you, cause it really brings context to what he's doing. In Jeremiah 7 it is referring to the Temple and it's referring to the destruction of the temple the first time, under the Babylonians. And we read, as God speaks to his people, Jeremiah 7:9-11-14,

“Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, “We are safe”—safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! [Remember that, Mark tells you Jesus came into Jerusalem and he was watching what was going on. I've been watching] declares the Lord. Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel. While you were doing all these things, declares the Lord, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer. Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your ancestors.”

The temple was destroyed. Jesus is clearly - and they are not confused - he is clearly condemning the temple. And in the mode of a prophet, Jesus is using a fig tree to explain to them that this temple and this sacrificial system is cursed and that it will be destroyed. And when you read Mark 12, when you read Mark 13, Jesus just clarifies this over and over again. And the question that we should be thinking to ourselves is why is Jesus cursing the temple? And the reason is why he is using the fig tree as a example. He's come up to this fig tree, and he's looking at all its beautiful leaves but there is no fruit. What Jesus is saying as he looks and he's watching this temple worship, he's saying - listen there is no fruit here - this was supposed to be a house of prayer to all nations and you're using it as a way to segregate one another - and worse than that, you've come from all over the nations to participate in Passover. But you're using this as a place of refuge; you've been lying and stealing and cheating and you think you can come here and that you'll find safety; and God's saying, listen, listen in Jeremiah 7, I destroyed the temple that bared my name, and Jesus is saying he will do it again if that's what it



requires to see fruit in your life. And that's exactly what happens, is in the morning - we read - as they went along, here's this fig tree that had been withered, that had been cursed, and that was dead.

I just want to take a moment as we wrap this up just to think on that for a moment, to see, to think; how does that apply to me? Because I think this is one of those areas that a lot of us - we misunderstand often the role of church. I was - this summer has been a busy one for me as a young adults pastor, I'm officiating five weddings this summer, ah which actually has just been a real blessing just to see - you know getting to walk with this young adults and to see these families begin - is a real honour. But I was at this one wedding early this summer and I was officiating and at the end - never had this happen before - at the end a lady just made a beeline for me and she came up to me and she said, "Thank you so much you did a great job," you know and I was like, "Ah thank you, I'm going to go tell my wife right?" Ah and she looked at me with tears in her eyes she just said, "Andy I have given up on the church. I've given up on the church." Listen how many of you have ever felt that way? How many of you have ever felt like - man sometimes it just feels like it's just a bunch of leaves and no fruit. And this is how this woman felt, and as she began to talk to me she said, she said, "Listen Andy, there was something beautiful and true that you said." And again I was like, <whispering> "I got to tell my wife this later." But as she was explaining that she's saying, "Listen I'm beginning to understand that I was going to church because I thought going to church would make me a good person, but the going to church would bear fruit in my life." Listen that's called religion, and Jesus cursed it! Because he understood religion *does not* produce fruit in your lives, it produces leaves; you look great on the outside and you can pretend really well that you've got everything together, but Jesus wants more than that from you, he's like a gardener that tends to you and waters and fertilizes and he's seeking to see that you would bear fruit. That there would be blessing in your life.

[Jesus is a Divine Messiah]

Listen, I was reading Colossians recently, Colossians 3 and as Paul is speaking to the church in Colossae he says to them, stop lying to each other, stop lying - church, stop pretending like you've got everything together, be real, you've been called to relationship not a religion. And what is important to understand - cause I think there's a lot of us that feel like we want to just give up on this whole thing and give up on church because we have this idea of God that is looking at us and he's looking for a reason to curse you - I don't see this in your life I'm going to curse you. Again that's religion, but what we read is a God that loves you. And a God that *cursed religion*, he cursed the temple that bore his name and what does he do in its place? As we see that week continue, Jesus goes to the cross and he is cursed in your place. He takes your punishment upon himself because he loves you. And he understands the only way that you and I will ever bear fruit in our lives; love, peace, patience, kindness, forgiveness, is when you and I don't have religion, when you and I have a relationship. This is what that lady was saying, she was like, oh man now I'm understanding the beauty of Christianity - it's about walking with God. It's about having Jesus in my life, it's about *me* now being the temple of God in which God lives in and through - and it's only through that you and I will ever see fruit in our lives. Not because we're pretending, not because we're lying to one another, but because in relationship with God we're walking with him and he is producing blossoms in our life. You know what I'm saying; discipleship, sanctification, we're beginning to see that we're changing in Jesus. And we begin to see that there is fruit in my life, I'm learning to love, I'm learning to forgive. And one of the



things that I was sharing at that wedding was I was just simply saying - listen if you want that kind of a marriage, that will only happen when you're relationship with God is right. You need to get right with the Lord and follow and let him move in and through you, but listen church, if we want to have that kind of a church that we're more than just leaves, we're more than just looking good, but there is fruit in us, it starts with you and I. It starts with our relationship with the Lord and that I am right with him and that I through grace have placed my faith and my trust in his ability not in mine. That's not religion, that's about a God who loves you and who took your place, a God who is willing to walk with you because he loves you and his desire to tend to you because he wants to see fruit in your life, church. And that's the kind of church we want to be, Amen? That is a house of prayer to all nations where everyone is welcome because we are all broken and in need of a Savior. A Saviour that's more than just a king, he's more than just a prophet, as you see and as you keep reading he is the Son of God. He is God in the flesh and he loves you, Amen?

Let's pray. Lord God, we are so incredibly thankful that you love us. I am so thankful that you are a good gardener and that you haven't given up on me, you haven't given up on us, and that you were willing to even curse your own temple that bared your name because you knew, that's what it would require to see us be fruitful; to see us to live in relationship with you and to live in relationship with one another. And so God we just cry out to you. Lord, in grace, through faith, in your son Jesus, would you live in and through us. Would you be changing us God, we want to see fruit, not only in our lives but in our marriages, in our church, in our community groups. God, would you find us to be more than just leaves, God would you find us to look more than just good on the outside God, but that we would be changing from the inside as we follow you in faith because you're good and because you've saved us. Lord we pray these things in your powerful name. Amen.