



**"What Jesus Sees"**  
**Scripture – Mark 1:1-11**  
**Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson**  
**Sunday, March 28, 2021**

I wonder – What did Jesus see?

The final verse of this story says, "Then [Jesus] entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything ... he went out to Bethany with the twelve."

It seems *this* was the reason for Jesus' journey into Jerusalem. He sent two disciples to conscript a donkey just so he could ride into the city and see what was happening in the temple. As soon as he had "looked around at everything," Mark tells us, Jesus returned to Bethany — to that village on the outskirts of Jerusalem where today's story began. So, what did Jesus see in the temple that evening? What caught his eye as he looked around?

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You know, we have seen Jesus do this before. Back in Capernaum, when he was just beginning his ministry, Jesus went into the synagogue on the sabbath day. The Pharisees were there — watching, waiting, poised to pounce if Jesus crossed a line. And someone else was there, too — a man with a withered hand. A man in need of compassion, in need of healing.

So Jesus turned to the Pharisees and asked, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" (3:4). And, when they said nothing, Jesus looked around. "He looked around at them with anger," Mark tells us. "He was grieved at their hardness of heart." Jesus looked around and saw apathy, indifference. A group of Jewish leaders who — while not *content* to see a man who'd lost the use of his hand — were also not *concerned*. They were unmoved by this man's plight — by the fact that he could no longer earn a living, could no longer face each day with dignity. When Jesus looked around, he saw that the Pharisees were not troubled in the slightest by this man's suffering. And he was grieved at their hardness of heart.

So Jesus healed the man with the withered hand. Right there, in plain sight — in the synagogue on the sabbath day. And, immediately, the Pharisees began plotting to destroy him.

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Now Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem. Along the way — as he traversed Galilee and crossed into Gentile Territory and traveled south to Jericho — he continued to heal the sick and welcome outcasts and feed the hungry. And

the ever-watchful religious authorities continued to conspire against him, so threatened are they by his audacious commitment to human wholeness. Jesus now stands in the city that kills prophets and stones those who are sent to it. He knows he will be handed over to death here; he said as much to his disciples just a few days before (10:33). But he has come anyway. No matter the risk, he is faithful to his mission. He has ridden into Jerusalem and headed straight to the temple, to the center of Jewish life – not just the center of *religious* life, but of political and economic life as well. The Jerusalem Temple is the place to see what this community cares about. Especially now, in the run-up to Passover, as Jews from across the Roman Empire are flocking to Jerusalem. The best and worst of Jewish piety and practice are on display. So Jesus climbs the stairs to the temple to have a look around ... What does he see? What does Jesus see?

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It's interesting ... the same question could be asked now. In our time, in our place. If Jesus were to turn up in an American city today, what would he see? What would Jesus see?

It's hard to say definitively what our national community cares about. There are disparate opinions bouncing around different echo chambers. But, if you just look at the headlines, the lead stories on the nightly news ... Well, they paint a bleak picture of our common life, of the plague of violence that haunts hometowns across the country. Ten dead in Boulder. Eight dead in Atlanta. And these are only the deaths that led the news. If Jesus looked around today, he would see a nation in mourning. But, also, a nation that is not surprised. Saddened but not shocked to witness two mass shootings in two weeks. If Jesus looked around today, he would see a nation with an epidemic of gun violence. But, also, the blight of apathy, of indifference. He would see a nation with too many elected leaders who seem utterly unmoved by the plight of families who have had to bury loved ones, lost tragically and too soon. I wonder, would Jesus look around in anger? Would he be grieved by our hardness of heart?

When Jesus looks around at everything, what does he see?

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If we read a little further in Mark's Gospel, we get a sense of what Jesus saw in the Jerusalem Temple.

The very next day he returns to the city. And he begins to drive out those who are buying and selling goods in the temple. Not because this sacred site has been turned into a seat of commerce; that was commonplace in the ancient world. The reason Jesus disrupts the marketplace is that the marketplace is exploiting people. The ruling class is charging exorbitant prices for necessary goods, namely doves — the animal that women, that lepers, that the poor have been commanded to sacrifice to God.<sup>1</sup>

In some ways this scene in the Jerusalem Temple is completely different from the one in Capernaum, where Jesus healed the man with the withered hand on the sabbath day. But, in other ways, it's exactly the same. Because in both places, Jesus encounters people in need of compassion, in need of wholeness. He encounters people who are longing for release from that which holds them down and holds them back – persons who are met only with apathy, with indifference. In both settings the religious leaders are utterly unmoved by the suffering they see, for they are motivated more by their love of power than by the power of love. Jesus cannot abide this. So he healed a man with a withered hand. So he turns over the tables of those selling doves. Though today's text doesn't put

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<sup>1</sup> See Ched Myers, *Binding the Strongman: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 299-304.

it this way, I assume Jesus looks around that holy place with anger, just like he did in Capernaum. I assume he is grieved by the hardness of heart he sees.

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When Jesus returns to the temple the day after he'd come to "look around at everything," he disrupts the marketplace. He overturns tables; he drives people out. Be he does *not* come with force or military might; he does not bring an army to raze the temple to the ground (as Caesar will do forty years after Jesus' death). Nor does he overthrow the powers that oppress (as the people expect of God's Messiah). He doesn't do any of this, because that's not who Jesus is. That's not what Jesus does.

If his ministry hasn't already revealed this truth, then his entrance into Jerusalem does. Jesus takes the traditional royal procession — cloaks covering the ground, palms that signal victory, shouts of "Hosanna!" — and he turns it on its head. Because he chooses a donkey. A donkey. Rather than enlisting a warhorse — a mighty steed befitting a king — Jesus sends his disciples to find a lowly beast of burden to carry him into Jerusalem. When it comes time to enter the city of Israel's kings, he chooses humility over power, and vulnerability over might. Because this is the way of Jesus; this is the way of love.

As we see in the synagogue and the temple, as we see time and again throughout the Gospels, the way of love is marked by compassion and mercy. It demands solidarity with those who are suffering; it leaves no room for apathy or indifference. And, because of this, the way of love is always in conflict with the powers of this world. Jesus looks around and sees those powers at work. He confronts and challenges them. But he always does so with mercy, never with might. That's why Jesus begins this week on a donkey and ends it on a Roman cross. After he disrupts the temple market, the religious leaders bring new ire and urgency to plotting his demise. By Friday this subversive king — who, today, rides into Jerusalem on a colt — will hang on a tree beneath a sign meant only to mock: The King of the Jews. It is a fate Jesus has already accepted when he goes up to the temple to look around at everything. It is a fate he has already accepted when he sends his disciples to fetch a donkey.

But, as the end of this story will show, even the malevolence of Jerusalem's priestly councils and the malice of Rome's military machine are no match for the power of love. The way of Jesus — the way of love — is more audacious than any show of force could be. It is the very thing — the *only* thing — that will disrupt systems that deny human dignity, that will restore people to wholeness. And it is the way that those of us who follow the crucified king are called to walk.

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Shane Claiborne is a Christian activist and author who, years ago, founded The Simple Way — an intentional community in North Philadelphia. More recently he has turned his attention to an urgent and challenging question: What does healing look like amid America's gun violence epidemic? For Claiborne, an organization called RAWTools offered one answer to this question. RAWTools melts down guns and repurposes the metal for garden tools. It's a 21st-century take on the biblical mandate to beat swords into plowshares. But there's more to this organization's work than simply turning guns into garden tools. RAWTools makes the process a communal exercise. As part of their Swords to Plowshares program, they bring together victims and perpetrators of gun violence to witness the transformation of a weapon into a life-giving tool. During these "gun-to-garden-tool" ceremonies, these people gather around the forge and take turns beating metal from a weapon designed to kill into a tool designed to cultivate life.

A couple of years ago, Shane Claiborne — who now works alongside RAWTools — held one of these “gun-to-garden-tool” ceremonies in Lancaster, in the same community that suffered the loss of five children when a man named Charlie Roberts opened fire in a schoolhouse. The response of the Amish was stunning, Claiborne recalled. They lost their children. But then they went to be with the family of Charlie Roberts to accompany *them* in *their* grief. And they pooled their money, and they created scholarships for the *shooter’s* children. Out of all of that, Claiborne reflected, there was immense healing that didn’t ignore the terrible thing that was done, but that didn’t mirror it either ... Part of what we’ve got to do is ask how we live in a world where violence and hatred are real without mirroring the thing that we’re trying to heal the world of. How do we, in fighting the beast, not become the beast?<sup>2</sup>

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How do we live in a world where violence and hatred are real without mirroring the thing we’re trying to heal the world of? The answer for me is the model we find in Jesus. We look to Jesus — the one who responds to human suffering with compassion, with love. The one who calls *us* to move beyond apathy and indifference and take steps toward healing this world. The one who confronts power with mercy, not with might. The answer is that we look to Jesus — the one who is looking even now at us. I wonder — what does Jesus see? Does he look around with anger? Is he grieved by our hardness of heart? I don’t think so. I believe that he is looking around with hope. Hope that we will choose the power of love over the love of power. Hope that we will walk in his way. Hope that we will commit our lives to his work of helping and healing, until all creation is restored to wholeness.

### **Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones**

Creator of the Cosmos, we open our hearts, our minds, and our souls to you on this week of remembrance. We focus on that decisive day Jesus rode into Jerusalem surrounded by supporters. He bypassed a grand stallion in favor of a humble donkey. In harmony with your will, he refused to project the coercive power of force, in favor of the persuasive power of love.

He calculated his entrance to coincide with the Passover Feast when his people celebrated their liberation from Egypt centuries earlier. Now, they dreamt of freedom from the Roman occupation and hoped Jesus was the one to usher in a new realm – a virtuous realm based on divine principles.

We are awed by the courage of Jesus to face his adversaries armed only with love and truth and a passion for justice. God, if we could muster just a fraction of his fearlessness, we would draw closer to the life you beckon us to live. We would reject our self-centered ways and love without restraint. We would dismiss self-serving fiction and seek your truth. We would spurn favored status and devote ourselves to the common good. Lord, inspire us to overcome our apathy and to become more faithful in following the way Jesus showed us.

Everlasting God, there are times when the evils of our day overwhelm us. We witness countless acts of violence, greed, bigotry, deceit, injustice – O God, the list is long. We often plead for you to right the wrongs; yet, we know you call on us to resist evil and to shed light where darkness reigns. You command us to treat others the way we want to be treated, to love with Christ-like love, to promote justice, and to strive for peace.

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<sup>2</sup> “Shane Claiborne and Omar Saif Ghobash: Called and Conflicted,” *On Being* with Krisa Tippett (August 15, 2019), [www.onbeing.org](http://www.onbeing.org)

Mighty God, fill us with courage so that we may act as a counterforce to the darkness gripping our world. Where others have sown seeds of depravity and destruction, may we plant seeds of beauty and blessing. May we embody the qualities of your kingdom, and may we never hesitate to establish them on earth.

Let us join our voices as one in the prayer Jesus taught his disciples and passed on to us, praying:

**Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**