

## SENDING THE BELOVED SON

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE KINGDOM



Luke 20:9-19  
Sixth Message  
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Today is Palm Sunday. We have been remembering the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem, his so-called Triumphal Entry. Our choir entered in procession. We have waved our palm fronds. We have sung our Hosannas and the handbell choir has added theirs. We have called out, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

Jesus began his journey to Jerusalem in the far north of the land. There he asked his disciples, "Who do the crowds say I am?" They summarized public opinion: John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the ancient prophets come back to life. "But what about *you*?" Jesus pressed; "Who do *you* say I am?" Peter answered, "God's Messiah" (Luke 9:18-20 NIV). This confession by Peter is the major turning point in the middle of each of the three Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Jesus immediately stated the implication of his Messiahship: "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (Luke 9:22). Where must this happen? In Jerusalem. So to Jerusalem they must go.

Next stop for the procession was a mountain top where Jesus was transfigured in the presence of his three closest disciples, Peter, John, and James. A cloud covered them and a voice spoke from the cloud, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (Mark 9:7).

That same voice had previously spoken at his baptism: "You are my Son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). With these words in his ear Jesus had faced Satan in the wilderness, overcome him, and commenced his public ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. With these words of belovedness again in his ear, he now set out for Jerusalem: "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51).

The journey to Jerusalem takes ten chapters in Luke. Jesus and his disciples joined the swelling crowds, all processing towards Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, the first of the three annual pilgrimage feasts where all who were able went up to Jerusalem, there to enjoy a fellowship meal in God's presence. As the pilgrims processed at Passover, they sang the *Hallel* Psalms, Psalms 113-118: *Hallelu-yah*, Praise the Lord! "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." They were all coming in the name of the Lord to celebrate his past deliverance of them from Egypt. And they longed for present deliverance: "*Hosanna!* Save, please!"

Passover began last night. Throughout the world Jews gathered for their Passover meal, and told the story of God's deliverance from Egypt. They ended their meal with a hopeful wish: Next year in Jerusalem!

Jesus's procession did not end when he entered the gates of Jerusalem. His destination was specifically the temple. He found it had become a market place. So he overturned tables and drove out the merchants. And he quoted Scripture at them: "It is written... 'My house will be a house of prayer' (Isa 56:7); but you have made it 'a den of robbers.' (Jer 7:11)" (Luke 19:46). *Robbers* is too weak a

translation. He accused them of being rebels, insurrectionists against God.

Jesus spent the next several days in the temple courts, retreating each evening to the Mount of Olives, probably to the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany. Luke reports:

**Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words. (Luke 19:47-48)**

There was great tension in the air. All the Jewish leaders viewed him as a threat. The chief priests: that's the Sadducees. The teachers of the law: that's the Pharisees. The entire leadership was against him. Jesus was such a threat that these two groups, normally opposed to each other, united to eliminate him. But the people were captivated. They couldn't get enough of Jesus.

During these days Jesus told several parables, including the one we will look at today to conclude our series on the parables: *The Way of the Kingdom*. Conventionally it is known as the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. It is recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19). I will use Luke's account. This begins:

**He went on to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time. (Luke 20:9)**

A man planted a vineyard. For us living in California there's nothing unusual about this. Nor was there in ancient Israel. The book *A History of the World in Six Drinks* tells a surprisingly comprehensive history. This parable is set in the era of the second drink: wine. Vineyards and wine were part of the cultural background, and feature in several parables. Noah planted the first vineyard. But this parable's opening scene evokes a different vineyard-planter. It evokes the Lord's Song of the Vineyard (Isa 5:1-7), which we heard as our Scripture reading.

**I will sing for the one I love  
a song about his vineyard:  
My loved one had a vineyard  
on a fertile hillside. (Isa 5:1)**

The beloved dug out all the stones—those who have been to Israel and seen its rocky hills will appreciate the size of this task! He built a watchtower, and hewed a wine press out of the rock. All these actions are included in the parable as told by Matthew and Mark. In the song, the beloved planted the choicest vines, but they yielded bad fruit. The beloved was grieved: "What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?" The vineyard had gone to ruin, so the Lord ruined the vineyard.

What are the vineyard and the vines?

**The vineyard of the Lord Almighty  
is the nation of Israel,**

**and the people of Judah  
are the vines he delighted in.  
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;  
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress. (Isa 5:7)**

This story of the vineyard follows a familiar four-step pattern. First, the Lord establishes something beautiful in his covenant people Israel, in this case a well-tended vineyard planted with choice vines. Second, rebellious Israel goes to ruin, yielding bad fruit. Third, the Lord responds in corresponding ruinous judgment; he ruins what they have already ruined. But, fourth, he promises restoration: replanted vines that will be fruitful. This pattern of the divine-human drama of God and his people—his rebellious, cantankerous, recalcitrant people—is repeated in the OT prophets across multiple sets of metaphors.

Turning back to Jesus's parable: after the owner had done all the laborious work, he rented the vineyard to some tenant farmers. Then he went away to another region for a long period, literally, a sufficient time. A time sufficient for the vines to yield their first good fruit. This would be four or five years until finally it was time to expect a harvest.

**At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out. (20:10-12)**

The tenant farmers would have been obligated to give a certain percentage of the crop to the owner each year, perhaps a third or a half. The vineyard has presumably yielded a good crop, but the rebellious tenants refused to honor their obligation. The owner showed great patience and long-suffering. He sent a servant not once, not twice, but three times.

Each time the tenants rejected the servant with escalating violence and shame, sending him away empty-handed. The first they beat, the second they beat and shamed, the third they wounded and threw out. They wounded socially in shaming, and they wounded physically in beating. The owner himself also suffered shaming in the humiliation of his servants.

**"Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.' (20:13)**

"What shall I do?" "What more could I have done?" asked the Beloved in Isaiah's parable. We are invited into the parable to consider this question. What would be the appropriate response? WWJD: What would Jesus do? What would you do? Call in the cops? Bring a lawsuit? Call in the big guns? Should the owner come himself, backed up by a posse of armed men? What does the long-suffering, thrice-refused owner do?

Mark's version tells us, "He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved" (Mark 12:6). One beloved son. The heir. The apple of his eye. "I will send my son, my beloved." Presumably the son goes alone, unarmed, vulnerable. The son is the expression of the father. The son makes his father and his father's will known. Surely the tenants will acknowledge and respect both son and father.

**"But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. 'This is the heir,' they said. 'Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed**

**him. (20:14-15a)**

They talked the matter over. The owner had asked "What shall I do?" Now the tenants ask the same question: "What shall we do?" Again we are invited to ponder this question. What would we do in their situation? They see the son and they see the vineyard. They realize that they can seize the one by disposing of the other. So they respond to the owner's magnanimity and vulnerability with brute force. They use power against the one who has renounced power. They threw the son out of the vineyard and killed him, so his blood not pollute the vineyard. Power had triumphed. Might is right. Rebellion is total.

**"What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others." (20:15b-16a)**

For the third time we are invited to enter the story and ponder the question. What will he do? What would I do in this situation? What would you do? Call in all the host of heaven and destroy the wicked tenants? Indeed, the owner himself will come for he has no one else to send. He will come in judgment, destroy the wicked tenants, and lease the vineyard to others.

**When the people heard this, they said, "God forbid!" (20:16b)**

At last the people speak. They can contain themselves no longer. I imagine this as an immediate, involuntary, shocked response: God forbid! May it never be! Elsewhere in the NT this phrase is used only by Paul, especially in Romans (10x) and Galatians (3x). The people knew their Scriptures. They knew the Song of the Vineyard. They would have had no trouble interpreting the parable, nor should we if we have a Biblical imagination. The vineyard is the Lord's planting, providing a home for his people in relation to himself. This was pre-figured in the Garden of Eden, then re-established in the land flowing with milk and honey. The tenants are Israel, especially its leadership. The servants who are sent are the prophets. Prophets such as Jeremiah who delivered the Lord's rebuke: "Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you" (Jer 7:11). The people understood the parable well enough, and were shocked.

Jesus drives the parable home:

**Jesus looked directly at them and asked, "Then what is the meaning of that which is written:**

**"'The stone the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone?'**

**Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces;  
anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.'" (20:17-18)**

He drilled them with his eyes. How they must have squirmed. He quoted the Scriptures: "the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" (Ps 118:22). They had all just sung this as they processed into Jerusalem for Passover. The psalm continues, "The Lord has done it this very day" (118:24a).

The stone forces a decision. What to do with this stone? Toss it on the reject pile? Or recognize it as the most important stone, the cornerstone of the foundation? Once it is laid in place it may prove deadly. Some will trip over it and be broken into pieces. Others will fall under it and be crushed.

The leaders, watching disapprovingly from the periphery, understood the implications of what Jesus was saying.

**The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this**

**parable against them. But they were afraid of the people. (20:19)**

The teachers of the law and the chief priests; the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Those at whose hands Jesus said he must suffer, as he began his journey to Jerusalem. Those who were already trying to kill him after he cleansed the temple. They will loom larger and larger in the coming chapters as they seek to use their power to dispose of Jesus. They are determined to throw him onto the reject pile. Jesus knows what awaits him. He knows that Jerusalem is where the unfaithful leaders of God's rebellious people kill his faithful prophets.

This text is usually called the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. They do loom large in the story and they will loom large in the coming narrative. But they do not lie at the heart of the parable. That space is occupied by the vineyard owner and his statement, "I will send my beloved son."

Jesus carried out his public ministry secure in his belovedness to his heavenly Father, as affirmed at his baptism. He made the journey to Jerusalem secure in his belovedness, as re-affirmed at his Transfiguration. Now he tells this parable after entering Jerusalem and cleansing the temple, which precipitates the quest to kill him. As the chief priests and scribes close in on him he is confident in his belovedness that lies at the heart of the parable. He knows he is the beloved Son sent by a long-suffering Father who has been repeatedly rejected by his rebellious people. He knows that this parable is going to play out over the next few days. It is this assurance of belovedness that will carry him through the gathering storm.

Today is the first day of Holy Week. Many churches will gather multiple times to remember the events of Jesus's last few days. Some will gather on Maundy Thursday for foot-washing and communion. Many, including ourselves, will gather on Good Friday to remember Christ's Passion, his suffering. We will retrace his way to the cross.

His Passion, his suffering, begins with the Agony in the Garden: his struggle to conform his own will to his Father's will, to accept the cup he is being asked to drink. "Not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Why? Because the Father has said, "You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased." It is the nature of sonship to delight to do the father's will. It is the nature of fatherhood to delight in the son who does his will. This is not coercion, or patriarchy, or authoritarianism. This is pure love: the love that flows between the Father and the Son from before the beginning of time.

Jesus was betrayed by Judas, arrested by an armed guard as if he were a violent rebel. He was tried by both Jewish and Roman authorities. He was exchanged for Barabbas, who had been imprisoned for real insurrection and murder. Finally the crowd turned against him and joined the leaders in calling for crucifixion. And so Jesus was crucified as a rebel, between two rebels, in place of the rebel Barabbas. He was numbered among the transgressors.

Our Good Friday service will focus on the seven last words from the cross. Seven times Jesus speaks: once shared between Matthew and Mark, and three times each in Luke and John. I turn now to consider these three sayings in Luke. Each one is so full of grace, as Jesus mirrors his long-suffering Father. Each one is spoken from the security of his belovedness.

The first saying is this: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (23:34). In one sense they knew exactly what they were doing. The leaders were guarding their turf and using their power to their own advantage. But this ambition had blinded them. Deep reservoirs of love moved Jesus to ask that they be forgiven even for this.

Jesus was crucified between two real rebels. One hurled insults and challenged Jesus to come down off the cross and save all three of them. The other rebuked the first, acknowledging their guilt but Jesus's innocence. Then he said, "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." Jesus replied to the penitent thief, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (23:42-43). Again spoken from deep wells of belovedness.

At the end Jesus called out in a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." (23:46). The communion between the Father and the Son there on the cross had remained unbroken. It was a communion of love, in which the Son was lovingly doing the will of the Father, and the Father was lovingly looking upon the Son with great pleasure. Not pleasure in his suffering but pleasure that the Son remained faithful in loving obedience no matter how much evil the rebellious world hurled at him.

The parable asks what the vineyard owner will do to the wicked tenants who have killed his beloved son. What shall God the Father do after his people have put his beloved Son to death on the cross?

He does two things with respect to his dead son. First, he raises him from the dead, for Death has no claim on this one who has lived a life of loving faithfulness. Second, he takes the risen Jesus up into the heavens into his presence. The eternal Son returns to the Father, in whose arms he had been embraced from before the beginning of time. He resumes that look of mutual love between Father and Son in the Father's presence. As he returns to that place he takes with him his assumed humanity. There is now a human being fully present in that beloved embrace.

But what will God do with the wicked tenants? What will he do with rebellious humanity on earth? Here also he does two things. First, he pours out his Spirit on the small band of Jesus-followers who continue to meet in Jerusalem. Filled with the Spirit, Peter stands up and gives his first sermon. He confronts the crowd of fellow Jews:

**"you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him... God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah." (Acts 2:23-24, 36)**

The people were convicted and asked the apostles, "What shall we do?" Again we have this question.

**Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)**

God's second response is to extend the offer of forgiveness to all who will come: "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." All will be forgiven.

In two weeks time, on April 27, we will hold a baptism right here during the second service. We are baptized into Christ, a sign that we have given him our allegiance. We become incorporated into him, participating in his death and resurrection. Following him means dying to our old self and rising to our new self in the new creation. We accept that Christ is not the rejected stone but the cornerstone of our life, a life of belovedness. We are also baptized into Christ's people: being built together into a temple for the Lord, on the foundation of the apostles, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

What more could God do for his vineyard? He sent his beloved Son who held out his arms on the cross in self-giving love. God now

holds out his arms in invitation: Come, join the Beloved Son in the Beloved Community. When we enter into Christ and into the Beloved Community we find that he is the True Vine, and we are the branches. We will be fruitful when we are part of the vine that is Christ, and when we are filled with the Spirit whom God pours out

on a rebellious humanity. God has sent his Beloved Son so that we might become beloved sons and daughters. Thanks be to God!

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