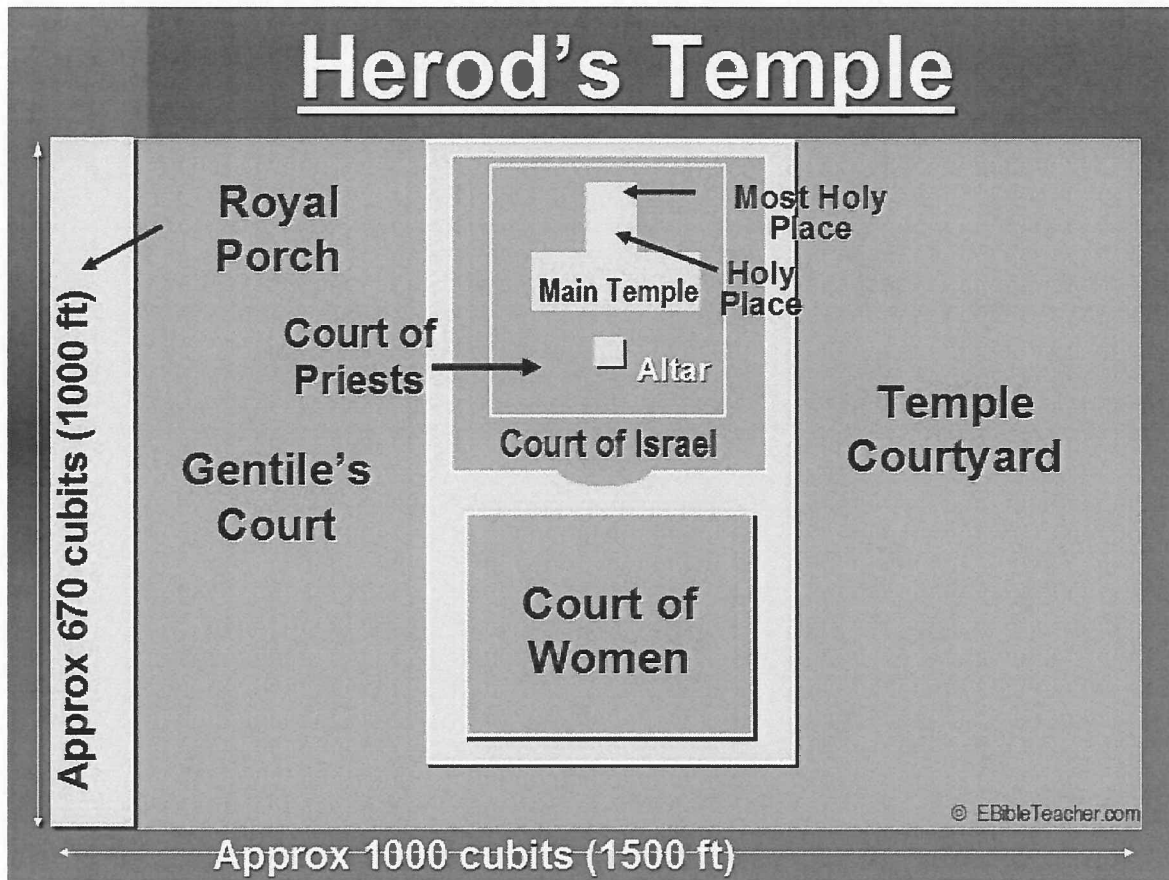


## The Last Straw

We're in the midst of a sermon series where we've been trying to figure out what caused the death of Jesus. This week we're studying the event that immediately precipitated his arrest, conviction, and execution.

1. Warm up question. Imagine yourself as an ancient pilgrim to the Festival of the Passover in Jerusalem. You've traveled on foot from afar and have now arrived in the Holy City. For you, what would be the most exciting part of the experience – and why? Your options include: feasting, people watching, making new acquaintances, arguing politics and theology with fellow pilgrims, seeing historic sites and buildings, praying in the temple, listening to famous rabbis teach in the temple, etc.
2. Read Mark 11:1-11.
  - a. Why did Jesus decide to ride on a colt? (Consider Zechariah 9:9-10.)
  - b. Why did the people react as they did? Based on the words they chant, what were their hopes and aspirations?
  - c. How do you suppose the institutional religious leaders felt about this demonstration?
  - d. How do you suppose the occupying Roman forces felt about this demonstration?
  - e. As Jesus approached Jerusalem riding the colt, as people were shouting their welcome, as he saw the city from afar and the temple dominating the skyline, what thoughts or feelings might he have experienced?
  - f. What purpose was served by Jesus' visit to the temple in verse 11?
3. The layout of the temple is diagramed on p. 3. It consisted of a series of ever-more-restrictive courtyards. Anyone could enter the Court of the Gentiles, even foreigners or religious outcasts. Only faithful Jewish men and women could enter the Court of Women. Only faithful Jewish men could enter the Court of Israel. Only ordained priests could enter the Court of Priests. And only certain priests at certain times, after cleansing rituals, could enter the Holy of Holies for specific purposes. In ancient thought, the Holy of Holies was God's earthly throne room. The "shekinah glory" (i.e., light of God) was often believed to be present there.
  - a. What ideas about God, people, and religion are implicit in the layout of the temple? In other words, what theology is implicit in the temple?
  - b. Read John 4:16-26. What is Jesus trying to say here? And what insights does this passage offer as to how Jesus felt about the temple?

- c. In Mark 13:1 and 30, Jesus predicts that the temple will be destroyed within a generation. (It was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70 and has never been rebuilt.) What insight does this offer as to how Jesus felt about the temple?
  - d. Jeff said, "I know the temple was well intentioned and served a purpose for a time, but it was almost as if they had God in a box. Jesus seemed restless with this notion. He seemed to be saying that his ministry marked the beginning of a new era in which true worshipers would understand that we can encounter God anywhere in even the most unlikely people or places." Tell us about a time when you feel you've experienced the "shekinah glory" of God in an unlikely place or person.
4. The day after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, Jesus returns to the temple and stages his great protest. Read Mark 11:15-19.
- a. The priests allowed sacrificial animals to be sold in the Court of the Gentiles. They also allowed currency exchange to take place there, so Roman coins could be exchanged for local coins, so holy sacrifices would not be purchased with profane currency. So it's not like the priests were permitting general commerce in the temple; only that which was necessary to support the temples sacrificial system. So why do you think Jesus was so upset? What are the possibilities?
  - b. What's the meaning of verse 17?
  - c. Verse 18 indicates that the temple protest renewed the determination of the religious leaders to arrest Jesus. Within a few days, they would do just that. Why did the institutional religious leaders feel compelled to get rid of Jesus after his temple protest?
  - d. Mark 15:37 tells us that, after being on the cross for several hours, "Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple [that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple], was torn in two, from top to bottom." What message or lesson are we supposed to draw from that?
  - e. Jesus' temple protest took extraordinary courage. He calls us to summon the same courage to take similar risks on behalf of goodness, truth, and justice. Tell us about a time when you saw someone act with that kind of courage?
5. Jeff closed Sunday's sermon with a parable he felt captures the essence of what's going on in today's Gospel passage. Re-read the parable (reprinted next page). What do you like about this parable? What don't you like about it?



## **A Parable Inspired By Mark 11 and 15**

Once upon a time, we were traipsing through the woods when we saw the most magnificent creature ever. God – we saw God! – exotic, illusive, fast as light, beautiful beyond description, wild, powerful, and frightening. Someone said, “Look! It’s God! If we can capture the creature, there will be no limit to our ability to control people and amass wealth.”

So we spread out, surrounded the magnificent creature, pounced, eventually subdued it, and brought it back to the village. We built a great zoo that we called a Temple, and put the God creature in the innermost cage. Now we alone could receive messages from the creature to share with the people. We alone could grant access. If people wanted to see the God creature, they had to pay up!

And so it was for years and years, until one day along came a mysterious revolutionary who attacked the zoo and denounced the zoo keepers. He was hell bent on destroying everything we had built up! So we arrested him, convicted him, and executed him. What choice did we have? God couldn’t be allowed to roam free among the people – too dangerous! So, the revolutionary died, but when he did, something strange happened: a great gaping hole was torn in the innermost cage of the zoo.

God escaped and is now on the loose! It’s anybody’s guess what might happen next. To be continued . . .