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Matthew 21:12-22. NLT

¹² Jesus entered the Temple and began to drive out all the people buying and selling animals for sacrifice. He knocked over the tables of the money changers and the chairs of those selling doves. ¹³ He said to them, "The Scriptures declare, 'My Temple will be called a house of prayer,' but you have turned it into a den of thieves!"

¹⁴ The blind and the lame came to him in the Temple, and he healed them. ¹⁵ The leading priests and the teachers of religious law saw these wonderful miracles and heard even the children in the Temple shouting, "Praise God for the Son of David."

But the leaders were indignant. ¹⁶ They asked Jesus, "Do you hear what these children are saying?"

"Yes," Jesus replied. "Haven't you ever read the Scriptures? For they say, 'You have taught children and infants to give you praise.'" ¹⁷ Then he returned to Bethany, where he stayed overnight.

¹⁸ In the morning, as Jesus was returning to Jerusalem, he was hungry, ¹⁹ and he noticed a fig tree beside the road. He went over to see if there were any figs, but there were only leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" And immediately the fig tree withered up.

²⁰ The disciples were amazed when they saw this and asked, "How did the fig tree wither so quickly?"

²¹ Then Jesus told them, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and don't doubt, you can do things like this and much more. You can even say to this mountain, 'May you be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and it will happen. ²² You can pray for anything, and if you have faith, you will receive it."

Throwing a mountain into the sea.

You can't grow up Christian without learning about Herod who ordered all boys

between the ages of zero and two be killed – in an attempt to get rid of the child

Jesus. But that Herod was actually the son of another Herod, Herod the Great.

The senior Herod was a ruthless ruler who represented the Roman government in the Holy Land between 37 B.C. and 4 B.C. He was famous for building a number of impressive pieces of architecture. He was responsible for the massive size and ornate style of the second Temple; even though he was a Roman official, he was actually a Jew, and he wanted to be remembered as the builder of the most memorable temple of the Jews. He built the palace fortress on Mount Masada, where eventually, a group of Jewish zealots committed group suicide rather than surrender to the Romans. He also built something called the Herodium, which today is a major archaeological site. It was a truly massive palace located about 10 km south of Jerusalem. It was a powerful symbol to the Jews: it represented Roman occupation and oppression. In 2007, Herod's tomb was discovered there. It was a hated symbol. Incidentally, the Herodium palace was largely destroyed in 70 A.D. during the Great Revolt by the Jews, which failed and led to perhaps a million Jews being killed.

Why would we be concerned with the Herodium, this structure that Herod the Great built so that everyone would remember him as, well, being great? Let's start with our Bible passage today. Jesus is trying to convince the Apostles of the power of faith. He tells them: *"I tell you the truth, if you have faith and don't*

doubt, you can do things like this and much more. You can even say to this mountain, 'May you be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and it will happen.

²² *You can pray for anything, and if you have faith, you will receive it.*” Was he just using the word “mountain” and the word “sea” generically, not referring to any specific mountain or sea? That’s what many people assume.

There have been people who have suggested that Jesus was actually referring to one of a couple of famous biblical mountains, like Mount Zion or Mount Sinai. They’ve suggested that the sea was the Sea of Galilee, because it plays such a central role in the Gospels.

But let’s look at the context of today’s passage a little more carefully. Jesus is crossing from Bethany to Jerusalem when he comes across a fruitless fig tree, which he curses, causing it to immediately wither. Jesus is actually trying to make a point that has to do with what comes just before this incident in Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus is comparing the supposedly faithful followers of God who turn the temple into a cheesy marketplace to a fig tree that’s useless because it bears no fruit. The people selling doves and changing money for profit aren’t serving God. They’re being false, using their faith to make money, not to serve God.

What's intriguing is that the Apostles don't seem to get the point. They are simply stunned at the fig tree withering so quickly. And so, Jesus turns this into a lesson about the power of faith and prayer. I find this particular passage in the Gospel that we're looking at today to be extremely intriguing. It's because the Apostles don't seem to be understanding Jesus, and yet, it might be that after Jesus talks about the fig tree in our passage, he continues on with a story that might be even more subtle. The story about throwing a mountain into a sea might well have a much more sophisticated meaning that we realize. It might be that Jesus is drawing on something that would be deeply meaningful to the Apostles, something that is extremely compelling to them.

But before we go there, I'd like to say that analyzing the Bible is something you must realize that I love to do. As a boy I used to read passages of the Bible and wonder about what they really meant. It gave my faith so much more meaning to know that there was this big thick book filled with stories that were rooted in ancient history and the origins of the Jewish and Christian faiths. I remember once, sitting in our Catholic church with my parents, completely ignoring the service, with my nose in the Bible. I was reading the passage we're looking at today. I sensed that there was something deeper than what the words seemed to be saying.

Remembering the mystery of the Bible and how it pulled me in is part of the reason I decided to retire early from being a faculty member and go to the seminary. I wanted to study the Bible. I wanted to know more about the beginnings of the Christian faith and try to understand it from the perspective of someone who was alive when it was all happening.

By the way, I was sitting next to my father that day in church. I didn't stand when I was supposed to stand or kneel when I was supposed to kneel. My older brother kept kicking me, trying to make me pay attention. I didn't sing. I didn't listen to the sermon. Catholics back then – unlike now – didn't really read the Bible. There wasn't one in the pew. I had brought my own to church. But I remember my dad looking down at me, perfectly content that I was ignoring the service. Because he knew the importance of what I was doing.

So, let's study this passage. Consider where Jesus is when he curses the fig tree. Scholars are somewhat aware of a path that Jesus might have taken as he moved from Bethany to Jerusalem. He might have been using a well-worn path that climbed over the Mount of Olives. It would have avoided the highest point of the Mount of Olives and gone through a saddle point along a ridge. So, at the point that he found the fig tree, what mountain might have been in view?

Matthew doesn't name it. Well, they would have been in view of the mountain that had on top of it the Herodium, that fortress built by the evil Herod the Great. It stood out among other mountains because of its very round shape. Why was it so noticeable? Herod had had the mountain reformed to look more like a volcanic cinder cone rather than a typical mountain of Judea. He wanted it to be distinctive. The monumental palace on top of it rose multiple stories above the mountain top. It had massive walls around it.

And notice that Jesus talks about moving the mountain, saying: *"I tell you the truth, if you have faith and don't doubt, you can do things like this and much more. You can even say to this mountain, 'May you be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and it will happen."* Well, in a sense, this mountain had a history of being moved, as Herod had ordered earth and rock from a nearby mountain to be moved over and added to the mountain on which he wanted to build his palace. He had this mountain reformed so that it would have a gentle thirty-two-degree pitch. It makes sense that Jesus would have been referring to the mountain with the Herodium on top. It was in view from where Jesus and his Apostles stood, was the most unusual looking mountain around, and it was something that the Jews who were subjugated under Rome would have had on their minds every time they came within view of it.

Structures take on meanings. Consider the Twin Towers in New York. For a long time, they represented the engineering magnificence of New York City. They were highly visible and when you stood below them, it was hard not to be in awe of them. Of course, later, they came to represent terrorism and the threat associated with people who wanted to do the U.S. harm.

The Herodium was built with tax money bled from the people of the Holy Land, who were mostly poor. Workers who were poorly paid had to move earth and rock with their bare hands to build this thing that was meant to honor a conqueror. After the palace was built, a privileged group of oppressors swam in its huge swimming pool, lounged in its gardens, and strolled up its two hundred marble stairs to get to the upper palace where Herod stayed. It had a giant Roman bathhouse. In fact, it represented the corruption of the Holy Land, just like those bird sellers and money changers represented the corruption of the Jewish temple.

And what about the sea where Jesus says the mountain could be thrown into? Well, as I said, some have suggested he was talking about the Sea of Galilee. But it was far away and not at all visible. What sea was visible? How about the Dead Sea? It's located just east of the Herodium. It's called the Dead

Sea because it is cut off from other water sources and due to countless of years of evaporation has an extremely high salt content. This makes it almost lifeless.

Because of this, ancient Jews and Israelites used it as a place to dump any items they found that were connected to pagan worship. If you found an idol, you went and dumped it into the Dead Sea where it belonged.

So, perhaps Jesus was suggesting that with enough faith and prayer, the Herodium could be tossed into the Dead Sea like some pagan idol, symbolizing the overthrow of Roman rule. It would have been a very effective image for the Apostles. And ancient people reading the Gospel of Mathew might well have made the connection, even though Matthew does not name the mountain or the Sea.

There are two things going on here, from our perspective. First, last week, we talked about the two miracles in Matthew where thousands of people are fed with a tiny amount of food and there are leftovers. We considered the hidden meaning that might lie inside these miracles. Well, often the stories that Jesus told in the Gospels also had an extra level of meaning to them. By considering the historical context of these stories, we can see how they might have been far weightier to those who were listening than they are to us today. Jesus probably

wasn't just figuratively referring to some abstract mountain that could be tossed into some abstract sea if our faith is strong enough. He might have been making a more powerful metaphor. Perhaps the mountain in this story represents evil. And the sea, the Dead Sea, might represent the total destruction of evil. This story that Jesus told could have hugely impacted his Apostles.

The second thing we might want to think about is what this all means to us today. Scripture wasn't meant only for the people who lived during the time of Jesus or who lived under the tyranny of the pagan Romans. Jesus is telling us that faith and prayer can fundamentally change our lives.

I appreciate you listening to my messages. I went back to school and did a young person's thing when I was an older man. True, there are more older people who go to seminary than there are older people who go to four-year colleges or enter professional Masters programs. But there I was, day after day, month after month, for three years, often by far the oldest person in the room. And frequently, in fact, more often than not, I was older than the professor. But I got back into the Bible, something that had called to me when I was a boy. I felt a deep joy at doing this. I didn't feel young sitting there in those classrooms, but I did feel like age didn't matter: I was doing what I was meant to do.

I'm trying to give the backbone of our faith, the Bible, relevance and meaning. We don't want to over-analyze the Bible or get caught up in convoluted theories about hidden meaning in the Bible. That isn't being biblical; that's being more concerned with analysis than faith. But by taking a reasonable, historically-rooted look at the Bible, we can often come to appreciate just how powerful Scripture was to the Israelites, the Jews, and then the Christians.

Today, we looked at tossing a mountain into a sea, and just what this conjecture by Jesus could have meant to the Apostles. And one of the biggest lessons of the Bible happens to be in this little story about tossing a mountain into a sea: by turning to God, we can do amazing things.