



Week 7: Turning Toward Jerusalem

Read Matthew 16:13-28, 17:1-13

This lesson is about four things

1. The political climate and situation in Israel, and Jesus' decision to go to Jerusalem
2. The authorization of the church to finish Jesus' mission
3. Jesus' prediction of his passion and the subsequent call to servanthood
4. The transfiguration as Jesus heads toward the final conflict

From Galilee to Jerusalem

Throughout the gospel lessons, there is a growing tension between the “powers that be” and Jesus. We saw it in our lesson on miracles, as the Pharisees began to plot against Jesus. We have seen Jesus doing his ministry through Galilee. But as the narrative progresses, we find passages in which it becomes clear that a confrontation is going to take place, and it is going to happen in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the seat of Jewish authority, and the epicenter of both political and religious power. If a real battle is to take place, Jesus will need to go there.

On the one hand, it is logical that Jesus would come from Galilee to challenge the authorities. Galilee was a hotbed of Jewish resistance to Rome. It was in the area near where Jesus did his ministry that the zealots were recruiting and gathering their forces. Zealots were Jewish patriots advocating violent overthrow of the Roman occupation and of King Herod. Those in authority were always concerned that the revolution would begin in Galilee and come south toward Jerusalem. In fact, in 66 AD, the zealots did muster forces and come south and take control of Jerusalem. It was this zealot rebellion that led Rome to destroy Jerusalem four years later, in 70 AD. One of Jesus' disciples, Simon (not Simon Peter) was a zealot, and he is called in Scripture “Simon the zealot.” Some believe that Judas was a member of a particular band of zealots called the “sicarii,” or “dagger men,” so named because they carried concealed daggers called sicae. This would mean that his name, Judas Iscariot, is a textual variation of Judas the sicarius, the singular form of sicarii. This might explain his betrayal of Jesus in scripture when he realizes Jesus is not advocating violent resistance to Rome and its' sympathizers. (Note that some scholars refute that as a possibility, saying that the sicarii only rose to prominence in the time after Jesus' death.) So it was natural that the Messiah would come upon Jerusalem from Galilee.

What was so unusual is what Jesus said would happen there: No, he would not lead the people to take control of Jerusalem again. No, he wouldn't throw out the traitor Sadducees, or depose the Roman governor. No, he would be given to the powers that be, the collaborator Jewish authorities, the Roman courts, and he would be killed. But, almost as a postscript he added . . . after three days he would rise again. In the Gospel of Mark, Mark 8:31 – 11:1 serves as the journey to Jerusalem, from Caesarea Philippi, to the Mount of Transfiguration, back through Galilee and Capernaum, and into Judea. Other gospels record his journey through Samaria on his way as well. He presses on toward Jerusalem until he finally arrives at Bethany, about two kilometers outside the eastern walls of Jerusalem, on the southeastern slope of the Mount of Olives.

Let's look at the players in the drama that unfolds as we move from Galilee to the cross and the empty tomb over the next few weeks.

- 1) **King Herod:** There are four King Herods at play during various times in Jesus' life. Note that all of these King Herods are appointed by the Roman emperor, and as such, rule at the emperor's pleasure. While they are Jewish, they are viewed by most as sell-outs to the Romans.
 - a. **Herod the Great** was the Jewish king of mixed heritage, who was appointed to be King of Palestine by the Roman emperor. He was the great builder, who restored and expanded the Jewish temple, and who was alive at the time of Jesus' birth. He was also clearly paranoid, particularly as he grew older, and viciously cruel. It was Herod the Great who ordered, when he heard that "the king of the Jews" was to be born, that all children under the age of two be killed. Herod the Great died right after Jesus was born. (That is why we date Jesus birth to 4 BC, as we know that is the time Herod the Great died.) When Herod died, Rome did not think anyone should have as much power as Herod the Great did, so the emperor divided Palestine into four quadrants, each with its own "tetrarch," or ruler.
 - b. **Herod Archelaus** was made King of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea and was as cruel as his father, so when Jesus was born, he didn't go to Bethlehem but on to Nazareth after returning from Egypt, so he wouldn't be in the region of Archelaus. Archelaus only ruled nine years, until the Jews of Palestine complained so much to Caesar Augustus that he was deposed in 6 AD, and Rome decided to put a governor directly in charge of Judea and Samaria. (see area on map in red)
 - c. **Herod Philip** was in charge of the northeastern quadrant of Palestine – and was the builder of the city in the far northeast, Caesarea Philippi. (see area on map in brown)
 - d. **Herod Antipas** was put in charge of Galilee and Perea. **The Herod we are dealing with in the latter part of Jesus' life is Herod Antipas.** Herod Antipas was the one who had John the Baptist killed after John denounced Herod Antipas for marrying Herodias, the former wife of his brother, Herod Philip. Herodias' daughter danced for Herod Antipas, and when she was given a request as a reward, she (prompted by her mother) asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. (see area on map in purple)
- 2) **The Pharisees** were a religious group that focused on the Mosaic Law. They believed that the Mosaic Law was more important than the practices in Herod's temple, and as such, were often at odds with the priests, or the Sadducees. In some ways, they were more open than the Sadducees, in that they accepted

oral tradition as well as written law, and accepted the prophetic books and other writings (Psalms, Proverbs, etc.) as sacred. They did, however, believe in strict interpretation of those Mosaic laws. They were seen as more connected to common people, as they brought faith into the homes of people rather than pushing people toward ritual worship at the temple.

- 3) **The Sadducees** were members of a religious sect that focused on ritual participation in the practices of the temple in Jerusalem. These were led by the priests. They were the religious authorities who were in power in Jerusalem, closest to King Herod. This tended to be an elite group of a higher social and economic class.
- 4) **Scribes** were lawyers who interpreted Jewish law. Most of these were Pharisees.
- 5) **Elders** were community leaders, judges who made decisions and rulings in the towns and meeting places.
- 6) **The Herodians** were members of a political party who believed that another King Herod should be on the throne and rule all of Israel, much as Herod the Great did in his heyday. Those mentioned in scripture were probably supporters of Herod Antipas. They were frustrated that Rome ruled Judea and Jerusalem directly by Roman governor.
- 7) **Caiaphas** was the Jewish high priest.
- 8) **Annas** was the former Jewish high priest, father-in-law of Caiaphas.
- 9) **The Sanhedrin** was an assembly of Jewish leaders that met every day as a court. It was comprised of people from a variety of political parties and groups. Every city had a Sanhedrin, but the Sanhedrin mentioned in Scripture is the Great Sanhedrin, which met in the temple itself, in the “Hall of Hewn Stone.”
- 10) **Pontius Pilate** was the Roman Governor in charge of Judea at the time of Jesus’ death. He is listed historically as the fifth “prefect” of Judea. He was appointed by Emperor Tiberius.

With these players in mind for the weeks ahead, let us a look today at some of the key passages as Jesus made his way to Jerusalem:

The death of John the Baptist

It seems that one of the turning points in Jesus’ ministry is learning that John the Baptist has been beheaded. Luke 9:9 records the following: “*Herod said, ‘John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?’ And he tried to see him . . .*” What would you think if you lived in North Korea, and a group of police came to your door and said “Kim Jong Un wants to see you.” Now, Jesus is told that Herod Antipas wants to see him. So he takes his disciples and “withdraws” to the other side of the lake, to Bethsaida. This is important because Bethsaida is in the territory of Herod Philip. After returning to Capernaum for the night, he takes his disciples and they travel to Tyre and Sidon, and ultimately all the way to the far north, to the Golan Heights and the mouth of the Jordan River, Caesarea Philippi. He is as far away from Jerusalem as he could get. But it is at this point that it seems he clearly makes his decision about the future.

The confession of Jesus as Christ, and the authorization of the church

All three synoptic gospels record a conversation in which Jesus asks his disciples, “*Who do people say that I am?*” although Luke omits the location of the conversation as being Caesarea Philippi. All three of them

record answers such as “Elijah” or “John the Baptist” or “one of the prophets.” But Peter answers, “you are the Christ.” This apparent recognition by the disciples that Jesus is indeed the Messiah seems to signal to Jesus that it is time for him to stop moving away from Jerusalem and the cross, and to head right toward it. The Gospel of Luke has a powerful phrase to describe his decision: *“He set his face like a flint toward Jerusalem.”* (Luke 9:51)

If you go to Caesarea Philippi today, it is a dead town, and there is archaeological site there called Banios. You can still go to what was the heart of the city, a shrine built into the rock, dedicated to the god Pan. Immediately next to that shrine is a huge cave, which was understood to be the opening to Hades, the underworld. This was venue that Jesus chose for the authorization of his church. Jesus only uses the word “ecclesia,” which is usually translated “church,” twice: once in this passage, and once two chapters later in Matthew. Here, he says, *“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”* (Matthew 16:18–19)

The church has been given a foundation: the confession that Jesus is the Christ.

The church has been given a mission: to storm the gates of hell, knowing that the church will prevail.

The church has been given authority: the keys to the kingdom, and the authority of heaven.

The threefold prediction of the passion, and the description of discipleship

Immediately following Jesus’ proclamation and authorization of the church, Jesus shares with his disciples exactly what is going to happen: From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (Matthew 16:21, also Mark 8:31 and Luke 9:22).

Later, as they are heading south through Galilee, we find a second prediction of his death. *“He was teaching his disciples, saying to them, ‘The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.’ But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”* (Mark 9:31-32; also Matthew 17:22-23, Luke 9:44-45)

Finally, when they are on the outskirts of Jerusalem, Jesus reminds them one more time of what is going to happen: *“Then he took the twelve aside and said to them, ‘See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again.’ But they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.”* (Luke 18:31-34; Also Matthew 20:17-19, Mark 10:32-34)

Each of these three predictions is followed by a teaching about discipleship. In Caesarea Philippi, following the first prediction, Jesus reminds them that they, too, would be asked to pick up a cross and follow him, that anyone who loses his life will gain it. Following the second prediction, he rebukes the disciples after they argue about who is the greatest, saying *“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”* Following the third, he teaches James and John (or, in Matthew, their mother) that *“But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first*

among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:43-45)

Let’s look with a little more focus at the call to discipleship that follows this first prediction in Matthew:

First, there is a call to self-denial, and instead to “take up one’s cross and follow.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “Self-denial means knowing only Christ, and no longer oneself. It means seeing only Christ, who goes ahead of us, and no longer the path that is too difficult for us. Again, self-denial is saying only: He goes ahead of us; hold fast to him... The cross is not the horrible end of a pious, happy life, but stands rather at the beginning of community with Jesus Christ.”

Second, Jesus contrasts those who seek to save their lives, as opposed to those who “find” their lives by losing them. Note that “the world” and “life” are contrasted. You can gain the world but lose your life. Instead, to “find your life,” you “give in return.” The fullness of life comes in the experience of giving it away: servanthood. “Pouring out your life as a drink offering” is the way Paul puts it. Jesus chooses to talk about laying down your life.

Finally, there is a future hope that is presented. Sometimes, the here and now isn’t enough to sustain us. The fullness of life-sharing doesn’t always provide enough motivation to keep us giving and serving, day after day. We give in response to what God has done for us, but we also give awaiting the coming of God in glory, and the full consummation of his promise to restore his creation.

It is important that we not miss the connection between the three predictions, and three calls to self-denial, cross bearing, and servanthood. There are days I hear Christians teach that Jesus came to carry a cross so we don’t have to, that he died so we don’t have to taste death. Indeed, that is not the message of the gospel, or of discipleship. Rather, the message is that we are called to live and give our lives just as Jesus did, and in doing so, we will have the joy of experiencing resurrection just as he does. St. Paul writes in Philippians: *“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”* (Philippians 3:10-11). While we are not studying the Gospel of John, there is a verse in John 11, when Jesus decides to go to Judea to see Lazarus, who he believes is sick and dying. His disciples urge him not to go, because they know that the authorities are out to get him. He decides to go anyway, and Thomas says, “Let us go, that we may die with him.”

The transfiguration

Perhaps the most misunderstood of the stories in Scripture is that of the transfiguration. Just after Jesus makes his decision to go to Jerusalem, he goes up on a high mountain, and takes with him Peter and James and John, his key leadership council. While he is there his appearance is changed, and he becomes dazzling white before them. And appearing with him are two figures, Moses and Elijah, and they “appeared in glory” and speak of his departure. Peter asks Jesus for them to make three booths, places that they can stay there and worship. Then a cloud overtakes them, and they hear a voice saying, “this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.” And when the cloud goes away, it is only Jesus there. He leads them back down the mountain.

The transfiguration serves a number of purposes.

- 1) It reminds the disciples that not only will Jesus be tortured and killed, but he will be raised in glory. The disciples see Jesus “in his glory,” a foretaste of what is to come. The good news isn’t good news if the story ends with the crucifixion and the grave.
- 2) The transfiguration shows Jesus as a final step in God’s revelation to humankind. Moses brought the law. Elijah brought the prophets. And Jesus is the fulfillment of both the law and the prophets.
- 3) It is a validation of Jesus identity as he heads into the most difficult days of his ministry. Remember his baptism, and the voice from God reminding Jesus of who he is, just before he begins his ministry. Here, Jesus is given that reminder again on his way to the cross, and the next generation of leaders is a witness to that proclamation. The disciples continue to struggle to understand now, but must lead in the days to come. Surely this experience will be front and center in their minds.
- 4) Finally, it ends with a reminder that indeed, Jesus can’t bring the kingdom on earth right there on the mountain. They must go back down to do what Jesus knew was ahead for him. And perhaps they begin to understand what that call to discipleship means for them.

I too, would love to stay on the mountain, and only know the glory of Christ. I too, would love to live in my mountaintop experience, awash in the presence of God. But I have to come down that mountain, and while the glory of God awaits us one day, we must hear his call to servanthood first.

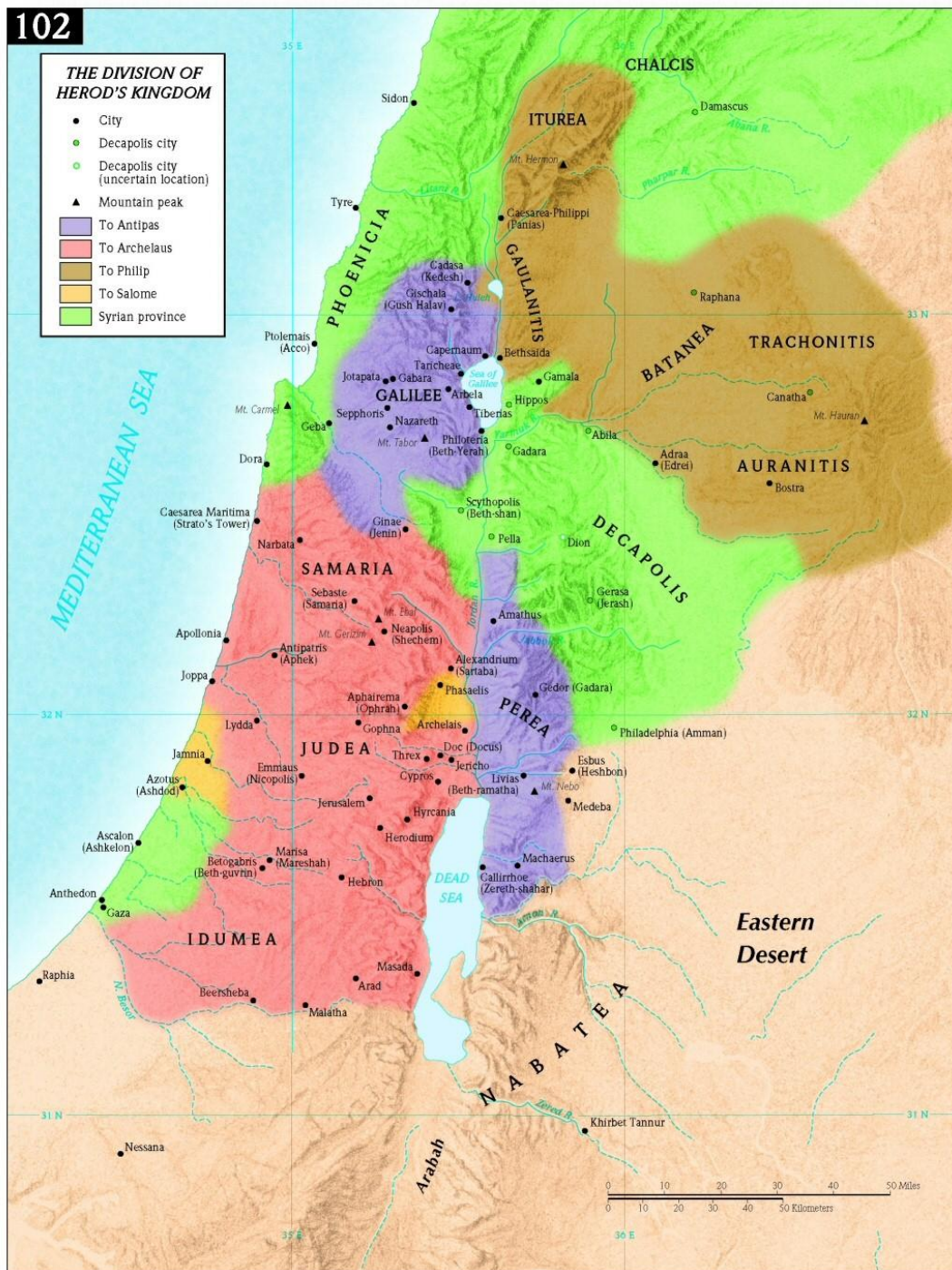
Israel and surrounding area after the death of Herod

Red: Given to Herod Archelaus until 6 AD, and then ruled directly by Roman Prefects

Purple: Given to Herod Antipas

Brown: Given to Herod Philip

Light Green: the Decapolis – ten self-governing Roman cities



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What stories immediately precede and follow Peter's confession of Jesus in Matthew?
2. What are the differences between Matthew's version of this story and the other two synoptic writers? Do the differences seem important to you?
3. Who were the various people the disciples claimed others thought Jesus was? What were they known for?
4. How does Jesus respond to Peter when he confesses Jesus to be the Christ?
5. How does Jesus respond to Peter when he began to rebuke Jesus?
6. What do you think it might mean for the church to "storm the gates of hell?"
7. How do you feel when you think the church has "the keys to the kingdom" and that "what you bind on earth will be bound in heaven?"
8. What does "self denial" mean to you?
9. In what ways have you "found your life?" In what ways have you been seeking to "save your life?"
10. Have you ever had a mountaintop spiritual experience? What was it like to come down?



Week 7: Journey Toward Jerusalem

Daily Readings

Week 7, Day 1

Luke 9:44-55

Commentary: The disciples might be inclined to think that their master would continue to perform miracles until at last the whole world would proclaim him as King. To correct their minds of such a notion, the Lord reminded them that the Son of Man must be betrayed into the hands of men, that is, to be killed. It was not God who concealed the truth from them, but their own determined refusal to believe that their understanding of the purpose of the Messiah was incorrect. The disciples not only expected the glorious kingdom to be ushered in shortly, but they also aspired to positions of greatness in the kingdom. They were already arguing among themselves as to who would be greatest. Jesus responds to this with another example of the great reversal found throughout the gospel of Luke.

Reflection Question: What are some of the things you hold onto when it comes to the character or nature of God? For better or for worse, how has this shaped your relationship with Jesus?

Week 7, Day 2

Matthew 4:1-11

Commentary: All three of the temptations that Satan offered could be simplified into this; “Jesus, there is an easier way to accomplish your goals; you don’t have to go to the cross and die for the sins of the world. All you have to do is bow down and worship me instead of God.” This is why, when Peter takes Jesus aside and tells him that they don’t have to go to Jerusalem to face death, Jesus says “get thee behind me, Satan.” Jesus is not suggesting that Peter is possessed by the devil, but that Peter is suggesting the same lie/temptation that Satan did when he was in the wilderness. The angel comforting Jesus is a reminder that God offers provision even during time of temptation or trials.

Reflection Question: Have you ever been tempted to let the end goal justify the means for getting there? How did you handle that situation? How might you handle similar situations in the future?

Week 7, Day 3

Matthew 16:13-23

Commentary: The proclamation of Peter is described in all three synoptic gospels: Matthew 16:13-20, Mark 8:27-30 and Luke 9:18-20. The final answer of who Jesus is, “The Messiah, the Son of the living God,” is confirmed to be the correct status, but only came about through revelation.

Peter was indignant at the thought of his Lord enduring suffering. He takes hold of Jesus as if to block his path and protests the news that Jesus must go to Jerusalem, suffer, and be killed in order to be raised on the third day. This drew a rebuke from Jesus, revealing to the reader that anything or anyone who hindered him from his purpose was out of tune with God’s will. By protesting against the cross, Peter became a hindrance to the savior’s purpose on earth.

Reflection Question: Imagine Jesus turning and directing the question of who he is to you; how would you answer him today?

Week 7, Day 4

Luke 9:23-27

Commentary: Having outlined his own future, the Lord invited the disciples to follow him. This would mean denying themselves and taking up their own crosses. To deny oneself means willingly to renounce the right to plan or choose, and to recognize Jesus’ lordship in every area of life. To take up the cross means to deliberately choose the kind of life he lived. But it also involves laying hold of life that is eternally life giving! It is no less than finding at last the reason for our existence and our eternal rewards of communion with the creator.

Reflection Question: When you hear Jesus say, “if you want to save your life you will lay it down for my sake,” how does that make you feel? What might these words mean for you personally this week?

Week 7, Day 5

Matthew 17:1-13

Commentary: The assertion “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” in verse 5 is precisely what was affirmed by the baptism scene (see Matthew 3:13-17). The occasion was a visible manifestation of his deity and a preview of what Jesus will look like when he returns, no longer the sacrificial Lamb, but the Lion of the tribe of Judah. A common reading takes Moses as representing the Law, Elijah the prophets, and Christ the new covenant on earth.

Reflection Question: Have you ever had a mountaintop experience with God in your own life: a time in which God’s presence seems more real to you than normal? If so take a moment to describe that experience here.