

I want to start off with a bit of a geography lesson for us today because I want to look at the Mount of Olives. Hopefully this will make the images our minds create as we read the text for Palm Sunday more vivid. I also hope we can see the polar opposites created by Jesus entering Jerusalem from this way.

The Mount of Olives is a large hill to the east of Jerusalem. It is comparably good soil for growing olives in the poor land surrounding Jerusalem. An area of the mount was called Gethsemane, which is Hebrew for "Oil Press," where the produce of the olive groves was processed. Olives had been grown there for probably at least a thousand years before the time of Jesus. All the way back to the time of King David it was called the Mount of Olives. (And we'll come back to connections between King David and the Mount of Olives too.)

The Mount of Olives is the highest point for miles, rising 230 feet above the elevation of the temple mount in Jerusalem. It served as a watchtower. Every approach to the city from the east as well as the north and the south could be observed from there. Jerusalem also communicated to the world from there by

signal fires, as when the beginning of each month was announced. The prophet Isaiah may have had this mount in mind as the place for announcing the king's coming. This high place was also a natural location for the very first sanctuary in the Jerusalem area.

The first photo I have is of the Mount of Olives as seen from Jerusalem. This photo may be a bit deceptive. I'm not precisely sure where it is taken from but the Mount of Olives is very heavily developed these days. There's not much open land on it.

The second photo is the city of Jerusalem as seen from the Mount of Olives. You can see how it overlooks the city. To the left of the photo is the Dome of the Rock, an Islamic holy place. This is also the exact location of the Jewish temple. When Jesus came across the Mount of Olives he would have seen the temple standing there instead. Jerusalem was a much much smaller city then. Most of the surrounding land was not developed at all.

Next is a map of Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives. Here you can see the Mount of Olives is just to the east of Jerusalem. It is separated from the city by the Kidron Valley,

which we come across in the Bible from time to time. Just to the south of the city, and intersecting with the Kidron Valley is the Hinnom Valley. You've heard of this valley many times. The Bible often calls it by its Hebrew name, Gehenna. In Jesus' time Gehenna was a metaphor for hell. It had become that because some of the kings of Judah used the valley to engage in forbidden religious practices, including human sacrifice.

Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday was probably along this road leading to Bethany. He also probably entered the temple through the "Golden Gate" on the east side of the temple complex. Notice how large the temple complex is. It is some 600 feet wide and about 1500 feet long. On Monday of Holy Week Jesus goes in and upturns the tables of the money changers and drives out the cattle. This would have taken place in this Court of the Gentiles. The temple itself is in the center. And as we've talked before in sermons, the temple itself is separated from the Court of the Gentiles by a wall, and the temple itself is not all that big.

During Jesus' last week of ministry - between Palm Sunday and Good Friday - he travels in and out of the city every day. He spends nights in Bethany then traveled on the road marked on the map across the Kidron Valley and into Jerusalem for the day.

Do you see how since Jesus wasn't really spending much time in the city of Jerusalem itself that it was difficult for the authorities to lay hands on him. And they wouldn't dare do it in the temple grounds.

But, back to the Mount of Olives. I started by saying that the Mount of Olives brings us some polar opposites. It stands out as a symbol of the city's defeat. In 2 Samuel we learn about a coup-de-eta attempt against King David by his eldest son Absalom. Remember, David's reign as king was not peaceful. It was horribly unstable and there was almost constant war and violence. When David learns that Absalom is coming to Jerusalem with a large armed force and plans to overthrow his father, David flees to the Mount of Olives. On the Mount of Olives he begins to plan and strategize how to take back the throne. By using cunning, some well planted spies, and armed forces he does manage to regain the throne.

Let's not miss the contrast between King David's actions for power and his descendant, another king, Jesus' actions. Jesus is going to use the Mount of Olives in a very different way. On Maundy Thursday he will leave Jerusalem for the Mount. Remember, Gethsemane is on the Mount of Olives. He will be overtaken by those who wish to destroy him. But rather than

fleeing, and rather than fighting back through stealth and cunning, Jesus allows himself to be taken. The usurping powers will appear to be successful. The two kings' stories will take different paths.

The Mount of Olives also meant great triumph to Jews. The prophet Zechariah is making an apocalyptic prediction when he writes, "Then the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley; so that half of the Mount shall draw northward, and the other half southward." He goes on to say, "And the Lord will become king over all the earth; on that day the Lord will be one and his name one."
(Zechariah 14:3-5,9)

So for Jews the Mount conjures up thoughts of both defeat and hope for God's ultimate triumph. I hope you can see in Jesus that both of these things will indeed happen. He will not follow the footsteps of David. He will not overthrow Jerusalem. He will be defeated. But by that defeat he will also triumph. God had come to Jerusalem over the Mount of Olives and God had come to usher in a new world order. Yes, God will win the day.

God will bring all people to himself. We get to rejoice in that triumph too.

One final bit: The crucifixion itself does not happen on the Mount of Olives, but it is an important place. The end of the gospel of Matthew records the ascension of Jesus. It doesn't say exactly where, but we shouldn't need an additional hint to know what Mount that occurs upon.

God has acted. God has acted in real ways in real time and in real places that we can see and study and visit. May God be with you each day of this Holy Week and every week to come so that you may rejoice in his gracious love for you, and come to your ultimate resurrection with Christ. Amen