

ONE INCH FROM THE FENCE

Matthew 21:1-11

This being Holy Week, I'd like to provide you with an overview of the events that began on Palm Sunday. It'll help you appreciate how quickly the tide turned: in less than a week Jesus went from being hailed as Promised Messiah to being hanged as a common criminal.

It'll also help you appreciate the proximity of it all: everything happened within a radius of a mile. Think about it: if you'd been there, you would've been in arm's reach of the Saviour. The question is this: would you have been among those who shouted, ***"Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord"*** or would you have been among those who cried out, ***"Crucify him! Crucify him!"***?

That's what Palm Sunday and the events that followed are all about., so let's get started.

Picture this: you're sitting on top of the Mount of Olives overlooking the city of Jerusalem. What stands out is the gold-plated Dome of the Rock. You've seen it a hundred times in pictures. In front of it and to the left are the walls of the Old City.

To your right – on about the same level – is an old Roman Road. It winds down the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem from Bethany. It was down this road that Jesus came the day he made his triumphal entry. About midway down the hill, he stopped and cried,

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets, and stones those who are sent to her! How often I would have gathered your children together, even as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you would not!" (Mt 23:27)

The Garden of Gethsemane is directly in front of you. You can't see it because of the slope. It'd only be a short walk through the trees. It's where Jesus prayed the night he was arrested. ***"My father, if it is possible, let this cup pass away from me; nevertheless, not what I desire, but what you desire."*** (Mt 26:39)

Between you and the Dome of the Rock is the Kidron Valley. If you look carefully – slightly to the left, you can see stone steps leading up the hillside. They lead to the home of Caiaphas, the high priest. That's where Jesus was taken when he was arrested.

The Jewish leaders were already there waiting to interrogate him. In the basement is a dungeon. That's where Jesus was kept overnight. Just outside is a courtyard. You can see it from where you're sitting. This is where Peter stood warming himself by the fire. Three times he was identified as one of Jesus' followers. Three times he denied it.

Just beyond Caiaphas' house is Mount Zion, the holy mountain of God. It's covered with houses, as it was in Jesus' day. Back then, it was known as the Essene Quarter.

The Essenes were Jewish mystics. They lived quiet, contemplative lives praying to God and observing all kinds of spiritual disciplines. Some believe Jesus was an Essene

because of the way he talked openly about God as his Father and frequently went off by himself to pray.

It was in the Essene Quarter that Jesus and his disciples met in an upper room to celebrate Passover. It would be the last time they were together.

Of course, the temple is no longer standing. The Romans tore it down in 70AD. But in Jesus day it was the focal point of the city. It stood where the Dome of the Rock stands today. If you use your imagination you can picture the various courtyards surrounding the Holy of holies rising up the centre.

The temple was a short walk from Caiaphas' house. The temple guards led Jesus to the temple early Friday morning. Again he stood before the Council. This time he was condemned for blasphemy, claiming to be the Son of God.

Caiaphas ordered him to be sent to Pontius Pilate because he had been hailed as king of the Jews, and that's treason. Pilate held court in the Antonia Fortress. One of the corner watchtowers still stands today. You can see it from where you're sitting. It's just beyond the Dome of the Rock. In the centre of the Antonia Fortress is a paved courtyard where Roman soldiers milled around. That's where Jesus was stripped and mocked and crowned with a crown of thorns and then flogged.

The streets of the Old City wind down from the Antonia Fortress to the hill of Golgotha. It was among this path that Jesus was forced to carry his cross to be crucified. Today we call it the *Via Dolorosa* – the road of suffering and pain.

The hill of Golgotha today lies beneath the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. You can see the roof of the church from where you are sitting. There's an altar table inside that sits at the top of the hill of Golgotha. Beneath it is a cylindrical hole carved into the limestone. It's where the base of a cross would have been inserted. You can feel it with your hand.

The tomb of Joseph of Arimathea is a short walk away. It was here that Jesus' body was taken to be buried.

Get the picture? If so, consider this: there are two different worlds represented here. One, Jesus' followers – those who were quick to pay him homage and sing his praise. The other, his enemies – those who were just as quick to condemn him and call for his death.

They stand so close to each other it's hard to tell them apart. That's the point: as followers of Jesus, we're never more than a stone's throw from the other side.

In his book, *One Inch from the Fence*, Wes Seeliger tells about taking his son to the Houston Zoo. One of their regular stops was the alligator swamp to see Scarface, "the ugliest, most vicious-looking creature who ever crawled the earth," according to Wes. He was basking in the sun when they got there. Wes writes,

"My son had a bag of marshmallows. I offered one to Scarface. With my fingers only one inch from the fence, I tossed the treat. CHUNK! The sound gave me goose bumps. Alligator jaws chomping the marshmallow – a dramatic example of what the boys in the Pentagon call overkill. Scarface opened wide for more. CHUNK! This was

getting to be fun. In no time, he had emptied the bag. And all the while, my hand was one inch from becoming Seeliger-burger. A frightening – but exhilarating – experience. One of those rare, surrealistic moments we all cherish.”

Think of this as a metaphor. Try as you may to be faithful and righteous and good, you’re never more than one inch from the fence, where danger and downfall are just waiting for you to slip up.

It happens:

- One of the sweetest men I’ve ever known started off working as a teller at a bank. He got behind with his bills and began robbing Peter to pay Paul, as he put it. He got caught and was sent to prison for embezzlement.
- He’s not the only one. What starts as a little innocent flirtation in the office leads to an extra marital affair and a broken home.
- For some, a few social drinks with friends lead to a life of alcoholism.
- For others, a little extra petting on a date gets out of hand and results in teenage pregnancy.

We want to be faithful and do what’s right. We all have good intentions. Have you ever met anyone who *intended* to get into trouble?

The problem is our humanness gets in the way. We’re easily tempted. It’s so much easier to go along with the crowd. Even Paul said, **“I find it to be the law, that while I desire to do good, evil is close at hand.”** (Romans 7:21)

Besides, life is ambiguous. Some claimed Jesus was the Messiah; others, that he was a heretic. Who are you going to believe?

Standing on the Mount of Olives that Palm Sunday morning, it’s so easy to believe he was the One: born in Bethlehem of the house of David, yet raised as a Nazarene, riding into town on the foal of an ass, just as Zechariah had prophesied. (Zech 9:9) The pieces all fit together.

Standing on Mount Zion, it wasn’t so clear: Jesus broke the law, he gave the Torah his own interpretation, he claimed to be the Son of God. How was he different from the false prophets who’d come before?

Consider this: it’s altogether possible that some of the very same people who cheered him on Sunday morning were among the crowd who called for his execution Friday afternoon.

His disciples are no exception. For example,

- Judas, betrayed him for thirty pieces of silver (Mt 26:15);
- Peter denied ever having known him, not once, but three times (Mk 14:72);
- Thomas was nowhere to be found when Jesus appeared to the disciples in the Upper Room following the resurrection (Jn 20:24);
- Later, when Jesus met the disciples up in Galilee, only seven of the original twelve can be accounted for (Jn 21:2)

Human nature is fickle. Just ask any public servant, any school teacher, and any sports coach. The same people who want to enshrine you one day will be out to lynch you the next. We switch loyalties as quickly as we change our power supplier company and our internet providers.

The distance between the Mount of Olives and Mount Zion is miniscule. As much as you may try to be faithful, you're never more than a stone's throw away from the other side. You're never more than one inch from the fence.

The Good News is: if Mount Zion is only a stone's throw away from the Mount of Olives, so is the Mount of Olives only a stone's throw away from Mount Zion. No matter how far you stray, you're *that* close to the mercies of God. All you have to do is reach out to Jesus, and he will take you by the hand and lead you to the throne of God's grace.

One of my best friends in early days in ministry was a gifted minister. He excelled as a pastor and quickly rose in the ranks, as it were. Whether he had a tragic flaw or simply let the pressures of ministry get the best of him, he began staying out late at night and drinking heavily. It was a downward spiral. His marriage ended, and he was forced to leave the ministry.

I lost touch for several years. Then our paths crossed again. I couldn't believe my eyes. He was clean-shaven and sober and had a good job. We renewed our friendship, and he told me all about his journey to hell and back.

With the help of AA and what he liked to call "other drunks like him," he said God's Spirit had touched his heart and turned his life around. Then he said something I'll never

forget. He said the whole time he was off drinking and gambling and chasing women, what he most wanted and needed was right there at the tip of his fingers. The peace and love and joy he longed for were there all along, if he'd only been willing to accept it.

Here's what I hope you'll reflect on during this Holy Week: you're standing with the crowd on the Mount of Olives. You're part of the multitude singing to Jesus as he enters the holy city.

Who knows where you'll be tomorrow? Remember: you live one inch from the fence. Be careful. Alligators aren't the only ones who bite. Be quick to call on the Lord for strength to withstand temptation and keep the faith. That's what Robert Robinson did. This is his prayer:

Come thou Fount of every blessing,
tune my heart to sing thy grace;
streams of mercy never ceasing
call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
sung by flaming tongues above
Praise the mount, I'm fixed upon it,
mount of thy redeeming love.

O to grace how great a debtor
daily I'm constrained to be!
Let thy goodness like a fetter
bring my wandering heart to thee:
prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
prone to leave the God I love;
here's my heart, O take and seal it,
seal it for thy courts above.