

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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THE FAITH OF FAITHFULNESS

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Text of a Sermon preached the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost

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JEREMIAH 31:7-9 | PSALM 126

HEBREWS 7:23-28 | MARK 10:46-52

Jesus often took Peter, James and John along with him when he wanted to show them something that would require explanation to the others. Peter, James, and John were there in the beginning when he called them to leave their nets. They were there in the middle when he took them up the mountain to see his glory. They were there in the end, in the garden, when Jesus went to wrestle with God, and he found out they couldn't stay awake just one hour.

Jesus showed them: here is what it is like to be called. Here is how God heals. Here is a revelation of my eternal nature. Here is a trial to the death. These three disciples are never said to be an inner circle, but they were with him the longest. They saw it all. As the crowds grew bigger, the arguments more polarizing, the expectations greater, they were trying to put it all together.

When Jesus first predicted his passion, Peter took offense. He had learned in Sunday School that Messiahs don't suffer shameful and senseless deaths. When he predicted his suffering a second time, they had just been arguing among themselves who was most important to Jesus, who was the greatest. Jesus said, that's just not the point. The third time he predicted his passion, he added more color, he described the physical violence, the mental torture, and added words that would remind them of the prophet Isaiah. The Son of Man will be beaten, given over, abandoned, sacrificed as a ransom for many.

After that third time, James and John came up to Jesus looking for some assurances. I choose to think that this is not just a repeat of the second argument, a foolish conversation about who is Jesus' favorite. No, this is a much more interesting conversation. Jesus had depended upon James and John. They perhaps had certain skills. They were willing to go faithfully into the fray; they would gladly suffer too. In John's Gospel is it Thomas who says: "Let us go and die with him." Here, in Mark, it is the same.

James and John are saying, we will go and die with you, but please, can you assure us that nothing will change? The military and political counselors of the king sat on his right and left hand. James and John are asking if they can continue to communicate to the rest the glories that will unfold, to give the advice they will need in the midst of the battle.

Notice how compassionate Jesus is with them. He humors them. They come to him full of well meaning camaraderie. "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" Their question in other words? We want to go into battle with you. Don't you dare say no. We are not just being brave here. We really want to prove to you that we would do anything for you.

Jesus, in his compassion, says yes. I want more than anything to say yes to you. You will drink the cup that I drink. But whether you will be at my right or at my left is only for God to know. You still don't understand the nature of this mission. This is something that I must do alone. This is a battle that only God's Son can enter and hope to fight to the end.

Jesus predicted his death on the cross three times. The first time it was presumption that clouded their understanding. Peter said, no way, it is impossible for God's chosen one to suffer and die. The second time, it was pride that kept them from understanding, being party of the movement was the thing, in the best seats. But Jesus spoke of serving, of becoming like a child. And finally, the whole notion of power would trip them up. God's power is not human power. Humans rule through authority of hierarchy and the coercion of violence. God will rule another way.

Because James and John seem so foolish (because they are so gallant?) we may miss the fact that Jesus does give them what they ask for. Yes, James and John, if you are faithful, you will drink the cup. If you stand at the foot of my cross, you will see the power of God in a whole new light.

Presumption. Pride. Power. Thinking we know more than we know. Not knowing our place. Forgetting that every action has a reaction, that there is a divine power in the universe, these are the things the disciples must learn. These are the things that Jesus must also learn through his faithfulness. Ultimately, where insisting on honor, shame, and turning a blind eye to violence, bring death, instead, see, that bearing the truth, taking responsibility and sharing forgiveness, gives life. Even resurrection.

When we hear Isaiah, hear 'Israel' first. Isaiah saw the breathtaking vision of God's Son - Israel - taking responsibility, languishing in Exile, painting a picture of what it might finally mean to arrive back at home: "he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed."

Hebrews tells us: “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”

Both Israel and Peter learned that not all Messiah's look alike. Jesus learned what it would mean to be truly abandoned by everyone, even his Father. The tradition tells us that James was put to death, and John spent his final years in exile. And two thieves ended up seeing Jesus' glory up close, one on his right hand and one on his left.

Yes, followers of Jesus. Go easy on James and John. Forswear presumption. Forsake your pride of place. Consider and trust yourself to God's power. We, too, shall drink the cup. For the life of the world.