

21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Sermon 10.16.21

**Mark 10:32-45**

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "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?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 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 as a ransom for many." (370)

So, you say you want a revolution.

Well, you know, we all want the change the world.

But, if you want money for people with minds that hate, you'll just have to wait.

We listened to the Beatles a lot in my household growing up. My dad loved them. Part of the background music to my wonder years, this song has more backstory than I ever knew, "Revolution" on *The White Album* recorded in 1968. Apparently, John Lennon wrote it, a mellow answer to a furious time. With its beat in the pocket, it was late to its own start.

The rest of the band was wary of releasing it, the fab four, with their mop-tops now overgrown. They'd been taken as the leaders of the counterculture. With this song, they seemed to betray the aim the world had assumed was theirs: "But when you talk about destruction, don't you know that you can count me out." It's not what many of their fans wanted to hear.

If you ask me, these now fifty years on, not siding with Mao Zedong puts you on the right side of history. So, I'm with Lennon there—John Lennon, not Vladimir Lenin. "If you go carrying

pictures of Chairman Mao, you ain't gonna make it with anyone anyhow—cuz, you know it's gonna be alright. It's gonna be alright.”

The thing is, though, this is an inadequate response to all that's wrong with the world. To all that makes us want a revolution in the first place, this is an inadequate response, that everything's gonna be alright—because for some people everything's not going to be alright. Some people, it seems, will never get justice, will never get wholeness.

So, here we are—revolution or resignation, a drumbeat of war or a beat in the pocket while you saunter down the street. Revolution or resignation, which some people can ride as privilege and safety in the system. People like me. For me, it's gonna be alright. For others...?

James and John, these two sons of Zebedee: they wanted revolution. That might be why they joined up in the first place, back when they were first called as disciples, leaving their fishing nets and boats and even their father to join up with Jesus. James and John, it could be said, or will at least this morning be supposed wanted a revolution.

And why wouldn't they? They lived amidst a still more furious time, still more than even 1968. Things were bad. *Rome* was bad.

And it wasn't even two hundred years since another bunch of brothers had gone up to Jerusalem to stage a revolution—Judas and Matthias and Jonathan and Simon. The Maccabee brothers headed up to the capital city in the year 167 B.C. to take it back from the Greeks, the Seleucid Empire, to reinstate a more faithful adherence to Hebraic law and custom in this, its capital city. Maybe the brothers Zebedee felt like their generation's brothers Maccabee.

They were religious zealots, these Maccabees were; and their violent revolt leaves the world with the rather muted holiday, Hannukah, an eight-day celebration of lighting candles and eating potato pancakes. It's a holiday that doesn't much match its purported cause, violent revolt by zealots against political expediency. In America, of course, it's become something of a consolation prize for our Jewish neighbors who don't celebrate Christmas but whom we'd like to imagine celebrating *something* in December. Now you can even buy decorations at a Hallmark store for Hannukah. Now you can even buy ugly Hanukah sweaters to keep up with all those ugly Christmas sweaters out there.

The Maccabee brothers, I imagine, would *not* approve. There's nothing in the Jewish law about ugly sweaters and having to buy them. But that's one of the many ironies of history.

So, now, two centuries or so later, the Zebedee brothers found themselves heading up to Jerusalem—up, for Jerusalem is in the mountains. And I wonder if they wondered whether now

was their turn—though this time against Rome. The Greeks had fallen—internal decay, internecine revolt, external invasion. So, now Rome, which was just another empire come to rule. They collected taxes. They waged war. They built temples to themselves. They crucified criminals, the absolute worst form of punishment, which had been around for a thousand years. Empires loved it. Humiliating, degrading, it had a chilling effect on any trouble-making.

That would explain their fear. “They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid.” Maybe they could feel the tension building. Maybe they could feel Jesus’ focus narrowing. This was it. They really were going to Jerusalem. Amazing! Terrifying. Death-defying. But with Jesus, anything seemed possible. Everything seemed possible. There was nothing it seemed he wouldn’t, or couldn’t, do.

So, what would it mean if they actually succeeded? What would it mean if the revolution actually happened? Jesus out front. Who would assist, sitting on his right hand and his left? Because with revolution it often just means someone different sits in the seats of power—so why not have it be James and John? Revolution: it’s just a turning of the tables, so now there’d simply be someone new at the head of the table.

You know, it’s possible the table in glory that James and John were imagining had nothing to do with the Kingdom of God, had only to do with the kingdoms of this world. It’s possible these two were thinking in terms of a political revolution, full stop.

Which would be enough, right? Jesus would be a good king, a good *emperor*!

Think about it!

There’s no mention of God in this whole gospel lection. This third teaching of Jesus as regards his coming crucifixion and his subsequent resurrection: there’s no mention of God here, just as there wasn’t in either of the two prior teachings. There’s no sense in the gospel narrating of it that this would be a supernatural occurrence, that Jesus rising after dying would be a supernatural occurrence.

Of course, you could argue that it could only be a supernatural occurrence. Anything that involves rising to life after dying necessarily involves a supernatural something. If death is natural and unavoidable, then rising to life after dying can only be thought of as *supernatural*, something that only happens because of a power at work that’s greater even than the power of nature.

But the way Jesus explains it here suggests his own agency at work—and this after a period of a thorough lack of agency. He would be “handed over,” and then mocked and spat on and

flogged and killed. The empire would very much have his way with him. The “powers-that-be” would be very much in control, while he was very much in their hands, unable or unwilling to do anything about it all.

But then he would rise again. Then, after three days, he would become active again, an agent of his own doing.

This isn’t the case, say, in the gospel of Matthew. There, Jesus claims he’ll “be raised,” which is to suggest he was still one acted upon, though now acted upon by God.

In Mark, though, Jesus is seen as active nearly all the time. On the move, on the go, Jesus only becomes passive during his passion, when the political realm comes to act on him, act terribly and violently on him.

But then he would rise.

And we could only guess what he was rising to *do*.

James and John could well have guessed Jesus’ rising would be to seize the power that had been stripped of him.

If that was the case, wouldn’t it be great if James and John sat in such glory with him, one on his right side, the other on his left?

Yes.

But, see, Jesus wasn’t rising to seize the power that had been stripped of him. He was rising...for...well...for what? What was he going to rise to do?

What indeed did he rise to do?

What, according to Mark, was the result of his rise?

The scenario we see here, with Jesus walking ahead of them, and they all following behind in amazement, in fear, is similar to one we’ll see play out later on. On that third day, on what would come to known as Resurrection morning, Easter morning, the women will have come to the tomb and when they’ve entered it and see Jesus’ body gone, they also see a man in white who tells them that Jesus wasn’t there, that he’d gone ahead of them, to Galilee, that there they would see him just as he said. They leave the tomb then afraid, these women do, terrified—and that’s the last we see or hear of them, the last line of the book in fact, so the last we hear of any of it, except for the book itself, except for the story itself.

The fact of this book, this written witness, means they did indeed eventually say something to someone. What’s more, it means we as readers are likewise to go back, can indeed likewise go back, back to the beginning, back to where it began, in Galilee where first it was said the kingdom

of God had come near. And we can do it again. We can follow him again. We can watch and bear witness to him having such amazing effect. We can watch and bear witness to him making immediate the presence and promise of God, making manifest the realm of God. And we can live our lives as witnesses, even ourselves coming to play a part. We can play a part in the coming of this reign of God. We can play a part in the manifestation of this realm of mutual service for the upbuilding of love. We can find a way amidst the way that is not resignation and is not revolution, is some third way. The way of faith...?

This, it seems, is what Jesus was rising to do, to go ahead of them once again, to lead them though they were afraid, to lead them once again to walk the way of good news, to walk the way of making manifest the kingdom of God, to move amidst the world though casting everywhere the reign of heaven. He came not to stage a revolution against the world but as a ransom to be paid to the world that those who enter the realm of God in following him might be made free.

This is really important, everyone, so listen up—this Markan point, this notion in the Gospel of Mark about how Jesus saves. It's not as a blood sacrifice made to God, as if God requires death in order to grant life. It's not this, which has come to dominate as the doctrine of atonement across all iterations of the contemporary church—substitutionary atonement which would have it that God is wrathful because of our sin, that God requires someone to pay for that in order to assuage his wrath, and that God would accept the blood sacrifice of his son as a substitute for what we cannot pay, so all we need to now is admit all this and we're good. It's *not* this. This gospel's assertion of how Jesus saves is rather that he is a ransom paid to the world that the things of this world might be made free.

Which means it's not God who needs to be paid. It's the world.

It's not God who demands such a price. It's the world.

When a ransom is paid, it's not paid to the one who longs for the freedom and return of the one held captive, it's paid to the one who has kidnapped and who now holds this captive. Payment is not to God, but to the world. It's the world that demands death, not God. It's the world that deals in death, not God.

So, for our freedom from the snares of this world, Jesus is willing to pay that all might be free—because somehow, somehow, the world has become captive to sin, to this quality that corrupts. Somehow, sin has found its way into the world—whether because the world is yet being created, is not yet finished, or because it's simply a part of the warp and weft of it, that the limitations that come of time, space, and matter force upon the world compromises that cannot be

thoroughly good, that can only be of certain degrees less bad. And revolution will often promise a breaking out of these compromises, a resetting the play of things so as to find a better way. But sin always finds its way back in. Revolutionaries become reactionaries. Radicals become tyrants. Underdogs come back with a vengeance.

It's only natural that James and John would assume this is why Jesus would rise. On that third day, Jesus would rise to come back with a vengeance. It's a safe assumption. It's just that it's wrong.

James and John would not get the revolution they might well have been gunning for—for such (revolution) was, so to speak, the way of the Gentiles. Such was the way of tyranny and torment, wherein, if you win, you then but spend your days looking over your shoulder for the next revolutionary to come along, waiting for the inevitable next turning of the tables so someone else can lord it over all. James and John and all the rest would get something else altogether, a realm of mutual service in which glory belongs to all.

This is the way in which might follow. Though often in fear, also in hope, it's in this way that we even baptize new members, this morning in Lenox, next week in Monterey. It might seem like quite a weighty thing to lay on so little a one as Claire, as Oscar. But it's only in mutual service for the sake of love that the world will be saved. So, welcome little ones, welcome all. Serve and be served, and thanks be to God.