

# *Wading River Congregational Church*

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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**Mark 10:32-45**

*"Sons Of Thunder"*

The lists of "the Twelve" who were closest to Jesus all start with "Peter and his brother Andrew; James and his brother John, the sons of Zebedee." Like Peter, James and John were renamed by Jesus: he called them together "Boanerges," the "sons of thunder." What, we wonder, did Jesus see in them that provoked that nickname? We will see a couple of incidents in their lives that maybe reveal what it was in their characters that Jesus spotted right away.

Their father Zebedee owned a fishing boat, and had hired crew as well as his two sons - they were by the standards of the day fairly well off. Their mother Salome was one of the group of women who supported Jesus and the Twelve "out of their means;" she was one of the group of women at the cross and at the empty tomb. Comparing the names in the different gospels leads some to think that Salome was in fact the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus, which would make James and John the cousins of Jesus.

### 1) *Three Close Disciples*

Peter, James and John are mentioned together at many crucial points in Jesus' life: they go with him to the home of Jairus when Jesus raises his daughter from death; they are on the mountain of Transfiguration, they sit

with Jesus on the Mount of Olives and ask him when and how the destruction of the Temple will occur; they are with Jesus - although sleeping - as he prays in the garden of Gethsemane. John is known to the high priestly family of Caiaphas and Annas (nobody is sure how that happened), and gains entrance for himself and Peter to the courtyard of the high priest's house when Jesus is on trial.

At the cross, John is there with the women, and hears Jesus commend him to Mary, and Mary to his care. From that time on, we are told, John took Mary into his own home and cared for her. After Pentecost, John is with Peter in healing a lame beggar in the Temple courts; they are together before the Sanhedrin, are imprisoned and released more than once. When Philip wins converts to Jesus in Samaria, Peter and John are sent to ratify what has happened there. Paul will later refer to Peter and John as among "the pillars" of the early church in Jerusalem.

We hear of James, son of Zebedee, only once after Pentecost. He is the first of the Twelve to die. Herod Agrippa, made king over Judea as well as Galilee in the early 40s AD, decides on a whim "to please the Jews" by having James beheaded in 41AD. His younger brother John turns out to be the last

of the Twelve to die: historians say John lived into the reign of the Emperor Trajan, which began in 98AD. John traveled as far as Rome, and was said to have done miracles before the Emperor Domitian, who then banished him to the island of Patmos. Later John was released and lived out his days in Ephesus. Somewhere in the period 70-90AD he wrote the Fourth Gospel, three Letters, and probably also the book of *Revelation*. John was one of the most influential figures in the 1<sup>st</sup> C. church, ranking alongside Peter, Paul and Luke.

## 2) *Sons of Thunder*

What do we know of the characters and discipleship of James and John? Why were they so close to Jesus? Why did he call them "Sons of Thunder"?

Two incidents from their lives, and a description of John from the Fourth Gospel, tell us quite a lot. One is from Luke 10. Jesus has told the Twelve, for the third time, that he is going to suffer and die in Jerusalem. But they do not take it in, still! Rather than asking Jesus, or discussing themselves, what he means by suffering and dying and rising again, they argue among themselves over which of them will be the greatest! They have some vague idea that when Jesus reaches Jerusalem, he is going to "set up his kingdom," and they want to be sure they will be major figures in it.

Jesus of course rebukes their foolishness and ambition; he sets a child before them as an example of simplicity, insignificance, dependence, humility – all the things they are not, but that true disciples of his must be! As Jesus then sets out again for Jerusalem, he travels through Samaria (though "good Jews" rarely did that) and looks for hospitality and lodging in a Samaritan village. When his advance party is badly received, James and John ask Jesus if they should "call down fire from heaven to

destroy them?" They seem unable to grasp that this is *not* Jesus' way, that it will never be the way of the "kingdom of God," and it should not be their way. But the "sons of thunder" don't get it. They want to destroy Jesus' enemies, and theirs!

A second revealing episode occurs at about the same time. James and John (or in Matthew's telling of it, their mother Salome), come to Jesus and ask that he "will do whatever they ask of him." The approach in itself speaks volumes, before they even get to their main request! Do they think Jesus owes them something for their support? What kind of discipleship is this? But the request is worse: when Jesus sets up his kingdom, they want to sit one on his right hand and one on his left – in the places of honor and authority!

Jesus' response is of course entirely accurate: "you don't know what you're asking." They have no idea what he, and they, are going to go through before "the kingdom comes." "Can you drink the cup and undergo the baptism I will face?" "We can," they say – unaware still of what Jesus means about his "cup" and his "baptism" of suffering and death. "Indeed you will," says Jesus, "but I cannot give you thrones to right and left of mine in the my Father's kingdom." There is irony here, of course: the kingdom of God will break in when Jesus is "enthroned" on a cross, and on his right and left hand will be two crucified thieves. James and John have no idea what they are asking.

## 3) *The Disciple Whom Jesus Loved*

If this was all we knew about these brothers, we might think Jesus was right about them being "sons of thunder," men full of noise and bluster, ambition and ignorance, elbowing their way to the front in the kingdom. After all, plenty of people have risen to leadership on those character traits.

But there are other strands in the Gospel narratives, especially concerning John, that give us pause in our evaluations of the sons of Zebedee. They were always in the *closest* group to Jesus, together with Peter and Andrew. Jesus was no fool; he knew people better than they knew themselves. Why *these* four men? The scene at the cross tells us something: John is *there*, the only one of the Twelve as far as we can tell. And into his care, Jesus commits his mother. You don't do that to someone who is only noise and bluster.

In fact we discover from careful reading of the Fourth Gospel that John, its author, never uses his own name but often refers to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." He is the one who sits next to Jesus at the Last Supper, and leans over to ask who will betray Jesus. He is at the cross, he is at the garden tomb when Mary Magdalene comes to tell Peter and "the disciple whom Jesus loved" that the tomb is empty. He and Peter run to the tomb; he sees the folded grave clothes and at that moment "believes." He is the one who at the lakeside tells Peter "It is the Lord," and after breakfast walks behind Jesus and Peter, as Peter is being forgiven and restored, until Peter demands of Jesus "Lord, what about him?"

Jesus' enigmatic response, "What is it to you if I said he would live forever?" gave rise, writes John, to the rumor in the early church that he would never die. When he lived into his 90s, most people no doubt thought he was doing just that, and all because Jesus had promised it. "*The disciple whom Jesus loved.*" What a title! There was a lot more to John, under the surface, than you might have guessed from his manner. A "son of thunder," perhaps, but very close to and loved by Jesus.

His writings tell us a good deal about his character: if you recall his letters, you know he is black-and-white, no-prisoners-taken... you are either a child of God or a child of the devil; you either embrace the light of Jesus or love the darkness... Yet John also writes some of the most penetrating and thoughtful commentary on Jesus, and the meaning of his life and death, of any NT author. His years of reflection, and his experience of suffering by his Lord, by his brother, by himself, produce in his Gospel a mature portrait of Jesus and a presentation of the gospel of Jesus that nobody else matches. Like Peter, there was much more depth to this man than the surface noise would suggest.

#### 4) Discipleship

What do we learn from James and John about being disciples of Jesus? Several small things, several much more important.

When people oppose you or your Lord, you are not supposed to call down fire on their heads! In Jesus' kingdom, you pray *good* things for your enemies! You do not decry people who do good in Jesus' name because they are not "one of us"! In short: no jealousy, no discrimination, no bigotry, and no retaliation. These are not the marks of disciples of Jesus.

If you are a disciple of Jesus, the "normal" worldly rules of hierarchy, prestige, advancement do not apply. In the world of the pagans, leaders and great men "Lord it over others." "*It shall not be so among you,*" says Jesus to his people. In his church, in his Father's kingdom, you will become a leader if you first take the place of a servant. You have to do the "scut-work," the thankless tasks, the out-of-sight, week-in-week-out jobs that nobody notices. Leadership in his kingdom comes at a steep price - suffering. But when you have suffered, you have

learned something priceless about leading by acquiring humility and endurance. And you will be following Jesus, because that is how he came into his kingdom - through the cross. The victory of God comes through the apparent defeat at Calvary.

If we want to be disciples of Jesus, James and John can teach you and me that small things matter a lot: for example, *be there*, and don't worry about *how long* you have. Woody Allen is supposed to have said that "80% of success is showing up," and there's a lot to that. Certainly you will never succeed as a disciple or as a leader if nobody can ever be sure that you will show up. John was there, at all the moments that mattered. And the two brothers, who were present at all the major moments, had the shortest and longest opportunities to "be there." One had only ten years more of discipleship, the other had over 60. Both did what God planned for them. It's even said that in his 10 years after Pentecost, James got as far away as Spain to preach, and to this day James is the "patron saint" of Spain.

Most of all, John would tell you, stay close to Jesus. Be someone of whom others say "he was a disciple who loved Jesus, and Jesus loved him."

When you know you are loved - by anyone - it changes your life! Let the love that Jesus has for you now make the difference in your life - so that even if your temperament is like "thunder," you can become a disciple of Jesus whose knowledge and love and experience and endurance shine the light of Christ over many, many people. Let his love flow through your life and out into the lives of other people, like John, "the apostle of love."

Let us pray...