

October 21, 2018 Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor Carolyn Albert Donovan
Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas

GOSPEL

Mark 10:35-45

The holy gospel, according to Saint Mark, the tenth chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

³⁵James 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.” ³⁶And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” ³⁷And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” ³⁸But 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?” ³⁹They 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; ⁴⁰but 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.”

⁴¹When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴²So 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. ⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Today, two favorite characters in Mark’s gospel are front and center...and they are acting the fool, as per usual. In Mark - where the disciples are famously dense and unable to believe in what’s right in front of them – James and John and Peter are the leaders of the pack.

One of my teachers in seminary was a scholar of Mark's gospel...and he would even perform it in its entirety from memory. In his personal translation, he leaned hard into the personalities of Peter, James and John. Peter gets his name from Jesus...it's a nickname...Simon is his given name. But Jesus names him Peter... "the rock," right? Dr. Rhoads just calls him Rocky.

And James and John? They dropped the nets they were mending when Jesus walked by... left their father Zebedee without a second thought, it seems. And Jesus had a nickname for them, too...

So, Dr. Rhoads calls this squad: Rocky and the Sons of Thunder...like they're a bunch of WWE characters ready to roll into the ring.

And they are coming at Jesus today like 3rd graders who've hatched a plan: "Jesus... promise you'll give us what we're about to ask for..." like they're going to be able to trick him into letting them have ice cream for dinner or something.

"When this is all over...the hard part...you know...whatever this part is...When you show everyone who you really are, and are the king of everything...we want to be right there with you. Promise we'll get to be there for the good part, too." You can almost hear the subtext... "because this part isn't really what we were expecting..."

And I can relate to them, really...I don't know if you've ever felt like you didn't realize what you got yourself into...

I certainly have...sometimes in the worst way...in ways where I didn't know what I was going to do next. I've also looked around sometimes and thought...I had no idea that this is what I signed up for...but I am so glad I ended up here. I have felt that way about parenthood...I feel that way often about being a pastor...I even feel that way about ending up in Texas.

In this moment, though, it seems like James and John are really just looking forward to getting to the end of the hard road...to reaching the destination.

And fair enough. They think it will all be worth it...if they get to stay beside Jesus until he finally arrives in glory...and they can be right there...when the worries of today will fade...money...broken relationships...illness...figuring out what on earth we're going to be when we grow up...

But...in his answer...Jesus is showing Rocky and the Sons of Thunder...and us...that everything that means anything is already all around us...that the kingdom of God is near...right now...and that the things that are hard now can't really be separated from that...no matter how far we go...but they can't stop it, either.

When he asks them if they can withstand the baptism he will go through...if they can drink from the cup he will taste...Jesus is tracing out the future of the church...but he is also talking about very real and immanent experiences. And he knows they aren't up for it.

At the time Mark wrote these words, we know that the followers of Jesus weren't yet celebrating the sacraments of baptism and communion the way we do now. God has been coming close to God's people through water and bread from the beginning of time...but our sacramental life has evolved.

So, this is for the churchy nerds...there is a chicken-and-egg kind of puzzle about how the story and rituals of the church are connected. We can see sacraments everywhere in Scripture...and yet...for very little of the Bible did sacraments, as we know them, exist. So what comes first? The story or the rituals? Well...of course...it's always both...

Here's what's kind of amazing to think about. These images Jesus uses today...of baptism and of the cup he will drink and share...they did exist...they meant something...when Jesus would have spoken these words.

Baptism, though...It wasn't bringing a baby in a white dress to a sort of indoor bird bath.

So, where my English majors and linguists at?

This is for you. Some etymology...There are two related words in Greek – “bapto” and “baptid-zo”...And we can know pretty clearly what they meant back then...because we find *both* words in *one* document from a Greek poet and physician, Nicander, around 200 BCE...It’s in a recipe for pickles. Which is basically the best.

The pickles...I should say cucumbers (at this point)...are first dipped (that’s “bapto”) in boiling water...and then later fully submerged (that’s “baptid-zo”) in vinegar. The dipping is temporary...and the baptizing...well that’s a bigger deal...It produces a permanent change. It is drastic. It is overwhelming. It is transformative. You don’t get to be the same after it happens. So, if you ever need to remember what the word baptism means...now I have doomed you to forever think about pickles. You’re welcome.

(<https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/baptizo.html>)

And the cup Jesus asks them about drinking? The cup is a common metaphor for suffering. We see it in other places even in Scripture...when Jesus asks in the garden if God can take this cup away...which is his immanent death...

Before they were the sacraments we know...the idea of baptism and of the cup...were wild, overwhelming images of transformation...and of suffering.

So, what might it mean then that the church...as it was evolving...with this layer of meaning fully known...claimed these complicated, difficult things and placed them at the center of our life? We don’t see them now...font and communion table and think first of suffering...it’s probably not even our first thought when we look at the cross anymore...which is actually kind of odd...And yet...those ideas were inseparable from the formation of the central symbols of our faith. When the early church took baptism and placed it as the entrance rite to the community of faith...when they took the bread and cup and placed it in the center of our gathering for worship...they knew what they were doing...They were firmly placing struggle...and transformation in the middle of what it means to follow Jesus...and saying, “This will be who we are. And God will be with us here.”

This is not to glorify suffering, itself, but to say something radical about who God is...and who we are...

Ours is a God who empties God's-self into the world...who reaches into lowliness and suffering... who does not use the power and glory of divinity to remain removed from or above the mess of human life.

And Jesus invites us to join in this loving way of reaching into relationship as the gospel reading ends. He says, "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 Humanity came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

God pours God's-self out to be so close to us and so we can come so close to God in the middle of the mess, the confusion, the uncertainty of all of this life. We do not wait until a glorious far off day. We live transformation now. We taste God's presence now. And it is complicated...and hard...but it is powerful.

May you carry this truth in the very center of yourself...in the face of everything that might overwhelm you...when the floodgates are literally open...

The waters of baptism can engulf everything that tries to drown you...The cup of Christ's suffering holds all of yours and more. And we can truly go out into this world with courageous, whole-hearted, passionate, righteous love because of these things...and it will not just change us. It will change everything.

Thanks be to God. Amen.