

A WAY THROUGH  
Rev. Jason Santalucia

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Text: Mark 10:35-45

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 a ransom for many.”

If I was Jesus, and two of my disciples came to me one day and said, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you,” I’d be a little suspicious. So, I picture him raising an eyebrow when he looks at James and John and says, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And I picture both eyebrows going up when they ask if they can have the two highest positions in his kingdom when it comes.

They sound like a couple of shady politicians making a backroom deal, trying to squeeze out the other disciples. But maybe that’s a little bit unfair. Maybe there’s more going on here than just a couple of guys trying to advance their careers.

The disciples have had a lot thrown at them recently, and I think these two in particular are feeling overwhelmed, and this is how they’re dealing with it—by clinging to the notion that Jesus is going to establish a conventional kingdom, and they’re going to be right there at

his side, one on his left and one on his right. Because believing that makes them feel like everything’s going to be okay, everything’s going to work out.

But in order to really understand where they’re coming from and why they have this need to reassure themselves about the future, you have to back up a few verses and look at what’s going on immediately before this reading.

Jesus and the disciples are on their way to Jerusalem, and beginning in verse 32, Mark paints a pretty vivid picture of that scene. “They were on the road,” he says, “going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid.”

So, the disciples, and apparently other people as well, are following Jesus to Jerusalem—the place where, twice now, Jesus has predicted that he’s going to suffer and die—and the mood is

very somber. This is not a happy occasion. This is not a victory parade. This is more like a funeral procession. Everyone's trudging along behind Jesus, no one's saying a word, and they're all filled with a sense of dread.

That's when Jesus decides to make another one of his predictions. "He took the twelve aside again," Mark tells us, "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'" — the Romans—and "they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."

Now, think back to the first two predictions Jesus made, and notice what's different about this one. It's a lot more detailed and graphic. Jesus doesn't just say he's going to suffer and die. He says he's going to be made fun of, and spit on, and beaten, and then he's going to die. So, this is going to be public, it's going to be humiliating, it's going to be drawn out, and it's going to be brutal. And that level of specificity, combined with the fact that this is now the third time Jesus is saying this, I think finally gets through to James and John. Whereas before, maybe they could ignore what Jesus was saying. Maybe they could tell themselves he didn't really mean it. Now, there's no getting around it. There's no hiding from the truth. This is going to happen, and it's going to be awful.

Imagine how they must be feeling. Imagine what must be going through their minds. What's going happen to this movement they've given their lives to? They thought Jesus was going to bring in a golden age for Israel and become a new king David. Was that just something they wanted to believe? Have they been kidding themselves this whole time? And what's going to happen to them personally? Are they going to be rounded up and executed along with their leader? Are the Romans going to make an example of them, too? Are they going to have to go through the same torture?

They must be terrified. They must be literally shaking. And that's when James and John whip out their resumes and ask Jesus if he's got some room for them in his future administration. But is that really what they're looking for—a corner office with a view? I don't think so. I think what they're really looking for is some reassurance, some comfort, some peace of mind. I think what they're really saying is: tell us there still might be a kingdom for us to be part of; tell us these predictions of yours aren't inevitable; tell us you have some kind of plan; tell us there's a way out of this future you keep describing.

But Jesus doesn't give them any of that. He gives them something else instead. Instead of a plan, he gives them a promise. And instead of a way out, he gives them a way through. He tells them they're going to get what they want—sort of. They're going to be right there at his side in Jerusalem, but it's not going to be like they imagine. They're not going to be there for his coronation. They're going to be there for his execution. They're going to go through the heart of that experience with him. They're going to be filled with sorrow. They're going to fear for their own lives. They're going to run away and go into hiding. And they're going to feel like their lives are over.

"The cup that I drink you will drink," Jesus tells them, "and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized."

But here's the promise: God won't abandon them. God won't leave them in that awful, lonely, fearful place. On the other side of darkness, there will be light. On the other side of despair, there will be hope. On the other side of sorrow, there will be rejoicing. Because on the other side of death, there will be life.

After three days, Jesus will rise again.

That's the power of resurrection, and it's what we believe in as Christians. It's at the heart of who we are. But sometimes, like James and John, we struggle to believe that there really is a way through. Sometimes we can't see past all the scary things in front of us—the challenges, the losses, the failures, the disappointments. And

sometimes we wonder if Jesus 'promise is still any good. Maybe a dead man got up and walked out of a tomb 2,000 years ago, but is God still opening tombs today?

Sometimes it doesn't feel like it.

But I'll tell you what a spiritual director once told me when I was struggling. He reminded me that following Jesus has never been about being safe. It's never been about taking the easy route. It's always been about stepping into the unknown. It's always been about taking the path of risk and sacrifice. Because that's the only way we ever experience resurrection—by going through the uncertainty, and the fear, and the grief, and the pain.

That's the only way we ever discover the futures waiting for us beyond our own personal Jerusalems. And they may not be the futures we imagined. In fact, they almost never are. But that's what makes the life of faith exciting and fulfilling. It doesn't take you where you'd like to be. It takes you where you need to be. It takes you where you need to be in order to find your true self—the disciple inside of you who's waiting to come out; the believer who trusts in God and faces each new day with confidence; the follower of Jesus who's never sure where the path ahead will lead, but knows you won't be walking it alone. Amen.