



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**July 25, 2021**  
*The Feast of Saint James*

*Solemn Eucharist*  
*11am*

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A Sermon by  
The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Associate Rector*  
*on*  
Matthew 20:20-28  
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### **The Zebedees**

The brothers, James and John, were the second set of brothers to be called by Jesus as he was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. That pivotal day, Jesus had only just called the brothers, Simon and Andrew, fishermen as well, and they were now following him, likely exhilarated by the new life that was in store for them. Simon and Andrew had been in their boat casting out their nets when Jesus came, but James and John, although indeed fishermen, were seated on the shore, focused on the painstaking work of mending their heavy nets, frayed by untold hauls of frenzied fish. Unlike Simon and Andrew who Jesus told would be “fishers of men,” a powerful hook, James and John didn’t need any convincing to leave those nets, to leave their father Zebedee, abandoning not only his nets, but his plans for them. I can’t imagine that this was a pleasant day for Zebedee. Not only because he lost his sons to this bold man, but also his wife! Tradition names her as Salome, not to be confused with the other notorious Salome in the royal court of the time. She, too, would leave the shores of Galilee, walking with her sons, advocating for them, following Jesus throughout Galilee, and wherever he might lead.

Jesus kept her sons close. They are often referenced throughout the Gospels, more than most. Like all the disciples, James and John were given power to cure diseases, to cast out demons, to preach, like Jesus, about the kingdom of God in a kingdom gone horribly wrong. Jesus gave her sons a new name, or at least a new title: the Sons of Thunder, he called them. Perhaps this is because they were especially hot-headed.

When a certain Samaritan village rejected them, no surprise given the tensions between Jews like them and Samaritans, when this happened they asked their Lord if they could reign down fire on the settlement, just like the old prophet Elijah had done in the Scriptures to some Samaritan soldiers. Jesus rebuked them and said “Ye know not what manner of spirit has claimed you!” In other words, not a good one! Despite this public rebuke, they remain in the inner circle. Jesus took James and John, with Peter, up Mount Tabor to experience his transfiguration, a vision of his glory unveiled, if only for a fearful moment. They longed to stay there, to make a new Temple, but, in the end, they

followed Jesus down the mount to do what had to be done, to go to Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets, and as their Lord said, would kill him.

It was on the way to Jerusalem that Salome, James and John's mother, made a request on behalf of her sons, a high order request. She asked him to make them his chief ministers in the kingdom that he and they have preached and prayed so much about, the one that is coming soon. Although we know the grim circumstances that are coming, she trusts that they will be victorious in Jerusalem, and that there will be a new royal court that will need administration. And who better than her sons of thunder? No need to pick which is best. There is one for the right and one for the left.

As persuasive as she may have been, Jesus tells her that she does not know what she is asking. The kind of glory he will reveal will shine forth from a cross. Does she really wish her sons to be on either side of him at that hour? And it becomes clear that both James and John are within earshot, because he immediately asks them evocatively if they can drink the cup that he will drink, or be baptized with the same baptism as him, implying that this will be severe to the extreme.

Bless them, they remain eager, unworried by his stark implications, maybe not even picking up on that dread, blinded by their ambition or zeal. They insist they are able to do anything he can do.

Jesus does have an answer for the both of them. He addresses James and John together. They will share, he says, in his bitter cup and his baptism by fire, but it is not up to him who will excel in this, who will be crucified with him, especially when James and John have no clear sense that this is the kind of thing that they are asking to do, for that will be the precise moment that Jesus will be crowned in glory in God's kingdom.

As much as Salome tried to do things quietly, the rest of the disciples about her lobbying, and how eager James and John were for some kind of promotion over and above them, it caused something of a crisis for the twelve. The indignation and fury of the other ten was so intense that Jesus had to call a special meeting about the whole affair. He tried to explain to them what the authority of God's kingdom is about. It is a paradoxical government, not about having the most power, the most rank or authority, it is really the weakest, the givers, the servants, the one's on the bottom who in their losing it all for God and their neighbor somehow break through the crust of the earth to find themselves exalted on high. Ultimately, it is Jesus' suffering for them and then dying which will reveal the truth of this unfathomable kingdom, making all things new again in the light of his Passion. But even the disciples of such good intentions, even Salome, James and John's mother, all these people who were so close, invested, and committed for the long haul, they couldn't understand the great reversal of fortune that was coming, even when Jesus spoke of it quite plainly.

I have a good deal of sympathy for Salome these days. Like her, I have two boys, one of them named after her son James, and I want the best for them. And I, like her, intend to apply all of my craft to be sure that they have a place in this world where they can thrive and prosper. But I have to admit that their prosperity in this world is significantly distinct from their prosperity in God's realm. From what I know of the lives of the saints, I tremble at the thought of their joining those ranks, even though that would be the highest of callings, wouldn't it?

Salome's boys, they wouldn't be crucified on either side of Jesus, but they would bookend, so to speak, their cohort of disciples. John, although nearly poisoned, would be the last to die out of all of them. It is written that, near the end of his life, he was quite frail and was carried into liturgies on

a pallet. Today we celebrate the brother that died far too soon, both saint and martyr. James would be the first to be killed among them, felled by a Herodian sword.

Our being called by the one who made us, by the love of God, is the highest calling. But living up to that calling, making our lives into a gift, truly loving God and our neighbor in this world may end up being anything but pretty. And this is by design, for we have fashioned for ourselves a realm that resists truth, goodness, and love, often with violent aversion. And yet this is the broken world that Christ continued to love, even through the ugliness, so that his friends might have a share in the *real* world, no matter what. But without those friends where would we be?

As we know with the Zebedees, James, John, and Salome, there have be so very many who followed in his divine footsteps, who brought us this far, living and dying and rising with their Lord, the holy ones who kept that good news echoing like thunder through all manner of darkness, so that we might hear it in our time, be brought ever further in the good things of God, drawn into their holy fellowship, learning what real authority is, and finding that in Christ all things have been made new.