

Acts 11:27 - 12:3

Matthew 20: 20 - 28

Rt. Rev. James R. Mathes

Come Holy Spirit: Touch our minds and think with them, touch our lips and speak with them and touch our hearts and set them on fire with love for you.
AMEN.

It is a blessing to be with you on this day when we celebrate the patronal feast day for this parish, that of the apostle James Bar-Zebedee, brother of John, often referred to as James the Greater. As you may know, I served as rector of a church in another diocese also named for St. James. Our James, here, was not this one. He was James, son of Alpheus. Whether from because of his being of a more slight physical stature or a perceived ranking of importance, James, son of Alpheus, is often referred to as "James the Less." And so, our church was called, "St. James the Less." I remember doing a service as a guest minister at a local nursing home where the program listed me as rector of St James the Less Episcopal Church. After the service, a woman came up to me and, in all seriousness, asked what was less Episcopal about our church. Thereafter, I always made sure to have us referred to as The Episcopal Church of St. James the Less.

But here we don't need to worry about that. Our appellation is not encumbered with any diminution. Rather, we have artfully and descriptively named this community, St. James By-the-Sea. I dare say none of us fully know why this parish was named for this earliest of the apostles. But what I would assert is this: names matter. The names that we give are tied to our past, they touch on who and whose we are, and they point to our future.

And so, we do well to reflect on James, son of Zebedee, brother of John, and follower of Jesus of Nazareth. James and John are called by Jesus together. They are Zebedee's kids. We are led to believe that they are a bit of a handful as they are given the additional moniker, "Sons of Thunder." And there is some evidence that they speak out, often and with a rather high volume. A noteworthy example is their suggestion to Jesus that they call down fire on a less than hospitable Samaritan village.

Nevertheless, they seem to have held a special place in the Jesus community along with Peter. Jesus seemed to bring those three along at seminal moments, such as when he took only them with him to heal Jarius' daughter. Similarly, it was Peter, James, and John who were with Jesus on the Mount of the Transfiguration. And later, in a most anguished moment, he took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee into the garden of Gethsemane to pray.

The pairing of these brothers with Peter is instructive. Because like the Rock, they seem to be almost always off target. Maybe it is that Sons-of-Thunder thing—acting before thinking, the tongue ahead of the brain. But you've got to love them as Jesus clearly does, because they are all heart. They may run into a wall, but trust them to hit it full speed!

In the gospel for today, we are introduced to their mother in a fleeting instant as she makes her only scriptural appearance seeking favored status for her sons. Now, I must say, this is likely another example of women getting undeserved Biblical blame. Remember Eve? It is more than a bit curious that in Mark's gospel, which is universally understood as a source document for Matthew, James and John ask Jesus directly for this privilege. For some reason, Matthew wants to spare James and John responsibility for this unattractive self-promotion. But Mark makes it clear these brothers are again running into that proverbial wall. Here they go again. We can imagine Jesus as they are elbowing to the front...storming their way up the ladder, shaking his head and saying "Boys.....oh, no..." Jesus no doubt predicted the strife that this request would bring among the disciple community.

So, this James Bar Zebedee for whom you are named is a bit "ready, fire, aim." He is always there with Jesus, at the center of the action. He seems to not quite get that Jesus is about meeting power with powerlessness. James is coming to the right places. He is with Jesus, but not yet of Jesus. He is on the way, but not of the way. He is what one of my spiritual guides has suggested about each of us: he is half-baked. He is not quite there yet. And as such, James is so very much an apt mentor for all of us in our Christian vocation. We see James as a human being, flawed but becoming an apostle, a messenger for Jesus.

This community that bears his name is half-baked. It is in a process of formation and becoming that is never ending. There are wonderful and holy moments in our past and present. And yet, there is always another life lesson to learn. Presently, this transformational work is being done through a process to call a new rector. This has the potential to be a seminal community moment where growth and new life happen, not because you call the perfect rector (you won't), but because of the spiritual growth that may happen to each of you as you are in deeper relationship with each other, the hurting world around you, and God who adores you.

In a few moments, our worship will shift as we hear words of an African American spiritual:

Wade in the water
 Wade in the water, children,
 Wade in the water,
 God's gonna trouble the water

These words will take us from this homiletical reflection to the baptismal font, where we will present three dear ones for baptism. After they and all of us make sacred promises, after prayers and the blessing of the water, they will wade in the water. They will do what we are to do as a people of God, wade into the waters of new life in Jesus' name.

It is worth noting that the spiritual that takes us there is loaded with past and power. It is rooted in the early nineteenth century, when millions of our brothers and sisters were brutally enslaved. Families were broken apart as human property being sold. Men and women were worked to death in the fields. Rape was a form of white privilege recreation. It is no surprise that so many took the risk to try to escape. This spiritual is rooted in their flight out of their Egypt. It is anchored in yesteryear's slaves remembering who and whose they are as a baptismal people as they again pass through waters from one life to a new life. Indeed, this spiritual song—like so many—was embedded with code. You waded in the water so that they hounds who track you will lose the scent! This is the slave's song. This is our song.

Our apostle James waded into those waters. With all of his imperfections, false starts, mistakes, and graces, he waded on in. And after Jesus' resurrection, he was a part of that great wave of

Good News. And as we heard in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, he did indeed drink from Jesus' cup, thus becoming the first of the twelve to bear witness with his life.

While none of us is a slave of another person and no one here wears real chains, each of us—myself included—is enslaved as a half-baked, imperfect human being. Maybe we are ensnared like James by ambition. Perhaps our chains are links of our own possessions. Our baptismal identity is an invitation to death and life. It is a wonderful possible impossibility . . . to wade in the water.

It is an invitation to live differently, not like the rulers of the Gentiles ... of Washington, Wall Street, or even the church. It is to live sacrificially and as servant: "It will not be so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant ..." Ironically as we sing a slaves' song of freedom, we call on each other to be so radical in our giving that we would be like a slave, giving everything to another not through coercion, but freely in the name of Jesus, out of love.

And so, beloved, here we are at the water's edge. What we leave behind are chains of this world. God is gonna trouble the water, but it is through troubled water that we are free and live. It is through travail that we find God. It is through giving that we receive. It is through dying that we are born to eternal life. You are named in the waters, the waters of baptism: India Jane, Matea Ruth, Nicole Susan. And as one, we are named St. James. Names matter. They tell of our past, who and whose we are and where we are going. Let's wade in the water...