

**July 26, 2020 -- (Pentecost 09, St. James the Elder, Apostle)**

**Sermon Text – Acts 11:27-12:3a; Mark 10:35-45**

- About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. –

- James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and 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...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.” -

**I suppose it would be hard to say exactly who is the “boldest” of the “Bold Witnesses” we’ve included in our summer preaching series, but James would have to be very close. He and his brother, John, were among the first called to be Jesus’ disciples. They were among the three who were present at Jesus’ transfiguration, and they were among the three taken with him upstairs at Jairus’ house to specifically witness him raising the official’s daughter back to life. Maybe that gave them extra confidence. Maybe that made them feel that they were exceptional. Maybe they were just always like that from the very beginning. I don’t know. Jesus himself called them the “Sons of Thunder.” That sounds like a great name for a rock band or a motorcycle gang, but it also sounds like Jesus thought that they were full of all kinds of sound and fury, that they were strong and powerful, and that they were capable of making an impression and putting a substantial emphasis on most things. In other words, they were “bold,” and they were “bold” by nature. Once, they wanted to call down fire from heaven to destroy an entire Samaritan village, simply because the people in that place had refused to receive Jesus as their guest. Jesus rebukes them for being so rash and stops them from responding with such violence, but it shows that they were, by no means, “shrinking violets” or “easy-going pushovers.” They were strong characters and confident followers.**

Our reading for today tells of an incident, in which James and John come to Jesus, and ask him to do for them whatever they ask. That, in itself, is enough to upset the rest of the disciples. “Just who do they think they are,” they must have wondered, “that they should be so bold as to ask for the positions of honor at Jesus’ side when he comes into his glory?” I mean, “Why them, when the rest of us are followers of Jesus too?” Jesus’ response suggests that their request is headed in the wrong direction anyway. “Can you drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” By which he means, “You don’t really know what you are taking about. Are you ready to suffer and die the way that I am? I don’t think so. And

besides, that isn't for me to grant. That's up to God the Father, not me, and those positions have already been filled." Of course, he does go on to assure them that they will suffer, and they will die because of their faith and in service to the followers of Jesus. James will become the first of the twelve to be killed. He will die in the year 44, when King Herod Agrippa begins rounding up and imprisoning some of Jesus' followers. It may have been then that some of that "thunderous" personality failed to serve James very well. Some scholars suggest that it could have been the very thing that got him into trouble and resulted in his being beheaded with a sword.

The James we are talking about is James, the son of Zebedee, the brother of John. He is referred to as "the Elder" or "the Greater," in order to distinguish him from James "the Lesser," also one of Jesus' disciples, who is celebrated, along with Jesus' disciple, Philip, on May 1<sup>st</sup>. That James is sometimes referred to as James, "the son of Alphaeus," and his mother was one of the other Marys in the Bible, who was likely a sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus. And, if that's not confusing enough, we have to also distinguish him from James, the brother of our Lord, who was a very important leader of the early church in Jerusalem, but not numbered as one of the twelve. And then there is the Letter of James, which is sometimes attributed to James, the brother of our Lord, but which scholars tell us is more likely written by someone else, who wanted to honor James and amp up the authority of his writing, a common practice in Biblical times.

James the Elder is the patron saint of Spain, which would make sense, if there was any evidence that he had ever been there. The tradition that he did missionary work in both Spain and the Holy Land dates from the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, and accompanies the tradition that James' bones, minus his head, which was buried where he was martyred in Jerusalem, were carried to Spain and deposited in a very famous church in northwestern part of the country. If James carried the good news of Jesus to Spain between the time of Jesus' resurrection and his death in 44 A.D., that would have been a "boldest of the bold" kind of move. Spain was as far away as anyone would likely have cared to travel from Jerusalem, at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea to Spain, opposite it at the western end of the sea. Beyond that, lay the Atlantic Ocean and parts unknown. The book of Acts condenses several years of time into a very few chapters. Roughly fifteen years pass from the beginning of the book to chapter 12, so it could have happened. But there is no evidence in any of the early writings that James was ever there. And, Paul argues in his Letter to the Romans, that he wished "to avoid 'building on someone else's foundation' by visiting Spain." So, though he was writing after James' death, it seems that he was unaware that anyone had ever been to Spain, James included. Further legends

about James' exploits in Spain only serve to cloud the picture even more, and aren't worth our pursuing at this time.

So, what we know about James is that he's bold. He's bolder than most. And maybe he's the boldest of them all, but we don't know that for sure. Asking for the positions of honor at Jesus' right and left hands in his kingdom was certainly bold, but Jesus had already chosen James and John, along with Peter, to be included in some of the most important events in his life, when the other disciples were left out. They were already part of the inner circle. What they hadn't yet figured out is that greatness has nothing to do with who is in and who is out. It's not a matter of being at the right or at the left. And it's not related to being near to the position of power. It has to do with service. Jesus makes this very clear. He tells his disciples, "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." It's about taking care of one another. And though James' life was cut short, we'll have to presume that he spent it serving the needs of those who were followers of Christ, be it in the Holy Land or in Spain. We certainly know that James' brother, John, did that. Commissioned by Jesus from the cross to take care of his mother, he took Mary and moved to the city of Ephesus on the western coast of what is today Turkey. He lived a long life, and is the only one of the twelve to have died of old age. He is buried there, under the altar of the church of St. John. Presumably, he spent a good deal of his time sharing and writing down his memories. An entire gospel, three letters and the book of Revelation are attributed to his authorship. Can we say, "Like one brother, so the other?" Maybe. We can't be sure. Did they both drink the cup from which Jesus drank? And were they both baptized by the baptism with which he was baptized? For James, we'd have to say "Yes." He literally gave up his life for the faith. And John too – living out his life, serving the people, looking after Mary, writing down his thoughts, being imprisoned on the Island of Patmos, inspiring the seven churches of the book of Revelation and countless others. But that's an entirely different story that we'll have to save for another time. For today, let's remember the two of them, especially James, as the "sons of thunder," and let's seek to follow James' lead as one of the boldest of the "Bold Witnesses" to the good news of Jesus Christ.

Amen.