

Sermon Notes: January 22, 2023

[Lectionary Readings](#)

Focus: Thunder Sons - James and John

Matthew 4: Jesus saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Zebedee's boys, James and John, are the "Sons of Thunder." They have a fiery temperament and a short fuse. Both couldn't keep their mouths shut in the gospel accounts and they will pay dearly in different ways at the end of their lives. The gospel carries the thunderous nickname, Boanerges, in Mark 3:17.

We know these two well. First, James is the author of the Book of James. James will eventually become the Bishop of Jerusalem. John gets credit as author of the Gospel of John. As an old man, John will be imprisoned at Patmos, which inspires parts of the book of Revelation.

In today's gospel, James and John make the impudent request that they sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in heaven. They want to be the best disciples, not like those other JV disciples. Understandably, the others were chafed by this arrogance. Jesus says it is not up to him, but yes, eventually these thundering two will drink from the same cup as he will. As important as John is to Christianity, I want to explore the person of James more closely.

Hothead I find James' thunderous life interesting because I, too, am a hothead. As I have become older, the edges have worn off a bit, but my soul is still like a fiery stove. I don't believe this fire is morally virtuous, but neither do I think it is a character defect. It is an attribute that needs management and pruning.

This fire inside can blaze a trail forward. Also, it can burn people's lives to the ground. It can lead you to suffer third degree burns or cook up something delicious for others. So if you are someone like James or if you love a James, give thanks. Then, ask God to *direct* that fire for blessing and not cursing.

James' history Acts 12 says that Herod Agrippa I executed James by the sword. If James was true to his thunderous temperament, his mouth got under the skin of the wrong guy. I find him extremely compelling because he channels his fiery devotion into prayer and service, instead of burning stuff to the ground.

Church history A fourth century historian, Eusebius regals us with details about James by compiling the work of an even earlier chronicler, Hegesippus (Book II, C):

(James) he was in the habit of entering alone into the temple, and was frequently found upon his knees begging forgiveness for the people, so that his knees became hard like those of a camel

I love this image regardless of his knee hardness. He could take the thunder inside of him and channel into serving his whole community. Like I mentioned at the beginning, he was the Bishop of Jerusalem during the first decades of the fledgling church. It was his discipline and character that kept the community intact. (It is a little confusing because some early Christians worshiped in the temple. So, the Jewish / Christian split we are used to today was much blurrier then.)

Paul I think it is also worth noting that James was a profoundly moderating force on the apostle Paul. Paul was commissioned by James' community to be a missionary. Paul was answerable to James, until James was killed. Much of what we think about Saul/Paul was shaped by his barely veiled disrespect for the Jerusalem church's authority. He likely feared James' authority and openly showed contempt for Peter.

Hagiography of James I have a bias: the first account is the most accurate. Acts says the government killed James. Later, when we get to historians like Josephus and Eusebius, the martyrdom accounts get more dramatic and more anti-Semitic.

In one account, James is flung off the peak of the temple by Jewish leaders. James manages to utter a "father forgive them for they know not what they do." The details of multiple accounts are not so helpful. More useful to us: when there are many accounts, we can get a rough sense of the magnitude of the person's impact. James was an undisputed big deal.

- He was a hothead saint who learned how to give his heart and mind to following Jesus.
- He was Jesus' cousin or his brother depending on your denomination.
- He was a servant leader of the early church who prayed in thought, word, and deed for followers of Jesus in his charge.
- Even in death, he was a stabilizing influence on Peter and Paul who took the burden of leadership in his absence.

So, thank God for James. Let's pray for the Jameses in our life. Let's pray for them as much as they pray for us. If we're willing, let's pray for a little more purifying thunder and fire in our own souls. **Todd**