

**WESTMINSTER**  
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**THE GOOD NEWS:**  
**Look at Me**  
Dr. Jo Forrest



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James and John are among the first disciples whom Jesus calls. These brothers abandon their father Zebedee and a family fishing operation to spend the next three years following Jesus.

Often in the company of Simon Peter, and his brother Andrew, James and John appear throughout Mark's gospel as part of Jesus' inner circle. They represent the other, rarely named disciples, and more particularly, they exhibit characteristics common to us.

We meet them in this final sermon in this series of The Good News of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus' entourage approaches the threshold of Jerusalem.

For the third and most explicit time Jesus describes what lays ahead.

*Dear God,*

*Call us close. Send your spirit to blow away the distractions. Place us alongside these disciples so we hear our savior's words as if he is an arm's length away. Startle us with his truth. Amen.*

### **Mark 10:32-45**

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they *were amazed*, and those who followed *were afraid*.

Jesus took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, <sup>33</sup>saying, “Look, 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; <sup>34</sup> they will mock him and spit upon him and flog him and kill him, and after three days he will rise again.”

<sup>35</sup> Then, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”

<sup>36</sup> Jesus said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?”

<sup>37</sup> “Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”

<sup>38</sup> 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?”

<sup>39</sup> They replied, “We are able.”

Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized, <sup>40</sup> but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to appoint, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

<sup>41</sup>When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.

<sup>42</sup>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. <sup>43</sup>But it is not so among you; instead, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup>For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.”

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Do you know James and John?

Growing up, whenever my family ventured on a road trip, my identical twin brothers bickered and bickered about where they sat in back seat. We drove a sedan, missing the ‘way back’ of a family station wagon. I know I am dating myself by recalling a vehicle type no longer considered safe and certainly not cool to drive.

Is it any surprise that they claimed the two window seats while I sat on the hump? As they got older, they fought to displace my mom so the winner could ride shot-gun. They complained of needing more room, but we all saw through their petty desires.

In our family, to sit next to the driver brought you closer to the place of power – the radio. Yes, I am dating myself with a ‘way back’ and single radio.

At home, they took bickering to new heights.

When we moved to a house with built-in corner bench for the kitchen table, both of them refused to sit at the corner-center. If you slid into that center, you were trapped for the rest of dinner – not a power-position.

They bickered over bedtime, curfew, clothing, laundry, and what to wear. Somehow, they created positions of power based upon who took a shower first or last and which towel bar was better.

To this day I despise listening to squabbles. At the time, I wondered if they fought so much because they were identical and wanted to be seen as different, even superior.

Now, I know all families wrestle with sibling rivalries. One of my friends recreates a war at the dinner table each Thanksgiving with her brother over who holds the gravy boat first.

In adolescence, a deep-seated desire to groom a sense of self-worth pushes us to stretch our wings; to fight for a place in the



family hierarchy. Insecurity pushes us to rise above another, occupy a place of honor, so we can say “look at me.”

I don't think my mom had any idea when she named her sons after Zebedee's sons how much their youth would mimic the early life of these disciples. My brothers are named James and John.

Let's return to the original James and John.

The gospel writer tells us that as the disciples approach Jerusalem, they are “amazed” and “afraid.”

This when Mark completes the sequence of three begun earlier when Jesus describes a betrayal, the cross, his suffering, death, and rising. In this final time, yet again the disciples ignore his words and demand greatness on the world's terms.

Is this a hint at how confusing, frightening, and strange Jesus' words are for us all? The good news of the cross, then and now, is a difficult thing to understand.

Jesus' followers could not conceive of this central mystery of our faith from his three simple statements. As then and even today, his saving grace cannot be solved or boiled into just a few words.

Over the two thousand years of our faith, writers and theologians speculate but never agree. What we do know and cannot dispute is that to say the cross symbolizes our faith becomes empty words unless we embrace it as a pattern for living. Jesus' cross demands our attention.

The first time Jesus predicts his death, Peter refuses, expecting a military victor instead. The next time Jesus talks of his cross, his disciples ignore him to argue who among them was the greatest. This final time Jesus repeats and expands the depth of suffering he will endure along with the oft unnoticed "will rise again."

Despite Jesus' prediction of death *and rising* as the culmination of his messiahship, James and John remain fixated on visible, hierarchical glory, for all the world to see.

As an aside, when Matthew's gospel rewrites this story, it shifts from James and John to their mother, letting her bear the guilt of ego-seeking. Luke's gospel softens it even further by eliminating any names.

Even though Mark's version offers cold comfort by keeping this demand in the mouths of real people, the rawness rings true with human nature.

This story invites us to honestly consider what we would ask of Jesus ....and listen deeply to what our request reveals. Think about this.

Let's return to the story. At first James and John demand..."do what we ask."

Their desire to be noticed, to satisfy the "look at me" craving incites them to reach for the next-most-visible-seats.

Laced throughout this ugly exchange are Jesus' words of grace. He deflects the worst they expose to reshape the request to something good.

He knows they long for an enduring relationship. They speak honestly. They want love, affection, and have shown their capacity for intimacy. Jesus does not criticize James and John for their ambition. He doesn't say, "It's wrong of you to want greatness. It's evil to strive."

Instead, Jesus redirects them. He hopes they stick around for the long run to see and then embody a radically different definition of greatness in their unique ways. This suggests that God can and will work with our desires and ambitions. God wants us to want more, seek more, hope more, and need more. Desires can be redirected. Ambitions can be purified.

What's lethal is not our striving; it's apathy, cynicism, and our complacency. What's lethal is not arresting those glory-seekers who will extract from others anything to satisfy ego's insatiable thirst for power and prestige.

James and John make a demand. In return, Jesus asks the question he always asks: "What is it you want me to do for you?" Not, "Here's what I want," but rather, Jesus offers, "How can I serve you?"

"How can I serve" is the drumbeat throughout all of Jesus' ministry.

After the brothers' failed attempt to secure the right and left side, Jesus expands the circle to address the bickering now coming from the rest of the disciples. He cautions them, "Don't become like the gentiles. They fight for hierarchies. They allow rulers to rise who turn into tyrants." He flips the order, "Become a servant."

Then Mark's gospel includes one of the bright keys to explore the mystery of the cross: Jesus said, "I came not to be served but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many." Jesus indicates that his death *does something*; it secures a release.

This verse sparks lively debates, and it has a history of, being misunderstood by those who only see the cross as a specific type of *payment*, to satisfy the penalties of human sin or to repay something owed to God.

However, the word “ransom” in explicit context of Mark’s gospel confronts manipulative power and enslavement, not the problem of sin or the need to secure forgiveness.

When Jesus describes his death as a “ransom,” this single word points to stories from the past when God acts to deliver people. Jesus declares (without stopping to clarify precisely how) that through his death, God will free people from oppression and captivity to another power.

The only path to a mature life unfolds when we surrender our most cherished forms of entitlement. The way of life comes from the cross. To serve is the goal. To serve creates abundance. To serve empowers. *To serve is to share in glory.*

By all means aspire to achieve. But recognize that glory is not permission to acquire, hoard, and multiply your own. Glory in God’s kingdom is offering one’s own self in love.

James and John are flesh and blood examples of the ways we become seduced by the values of hierarchy. James and John are flesh and blood examples of what unfolds when they saw the gift of the risen Christ. They let go of all their rivalries. They became servants.

This master storyteller drives home the point in the next story. When they approach Jericho, a blind beggar sitting by

the road begins to shout. Jesus asks him, what would you like me to do for you?

“Let me see again.” Jesus opens his eyes.

The gospel opens our eyes to see that life comes by serving others. Isn't that the good news?

Jesus gives his all. As he approaches the cross, he essentially says, “look at me.” His ultimate service for us, by dying as a ransom, frees us from the hierarchies and tyranny that strangles life so that we can thrive...thrive by serving.

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