

"So, You Want to be a _____?"

Job 38:1-7, 34-41;
Ps. 104:1-9, 24, 35; Mark 10:35-45
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
Rev. David E. Young
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Everybody wants to be somebody. We push ourselves to excel. We push our children to succeed. We are constantly reaching beyond ourselves, convinced that our happiness lies somewhere just up ahead, just a little out of reach.

James and John wanted to be special. They wanted to be at Jesus' right and left hand when he came into his glory. They had high ambitions, to say the least.

And we may hate them for their brashness and for their boldness, but we can't say we don't understand it. Even if they didn't really understand what they were asking, at least they knew where true greatness lay. It was with Jesus and they wanted to be right next to him.

One of my favorite Westerns is "The Magnificent Seven." In one of the opening scenes a crisis has developed. Some well-intentioned traveling salesmen are trying to make arrangements to have a friend buried. But no one is willing to drive the team of horses pulling the hearse up the hill to the cemetery because the deceased is not a white man and the cemetery is for whites only.

Finally, in exasperation over the ridiculous stalemate, Yul Brynner volunteers to drive the hearse up the hill. Curious and courageous, Steve McQueen signs on as "shotgun", the man who sits next to the driver, shotgun at the ready.

Yul didn't ask for help, but McQueen's companionship was welcome and, yes, they do make it up the hill. (Otherwise it would have been a very short movie!)

When our kids were growing up, as we made our way to the car one of them would usually yell, "Shotgun!" meaning they wanted to sit up next to the driver. I don't think they gave much thought to the real meaning of the term.

The person riding shotgun was putting his or her life on the line in service to others.

Here in Mark's Gospel James and John are yelling "Shotgun!" They want to sit on the right and left sides of Jesus when he is in his glory. I don't think they gave much thought to what they were asking. Or did they? Were they thinking of serving others or lording it over them?

Jesus has already announced three times in Mark's Gospel that his journey to Jerusalem is to suffer and die on the cross. Jesus asks James and John whether they are willing to suffer what he is going to suffer and they quickly say: "We are able."

It reminds me of the old Gospel song, "Are Ye Able?" written in the 1920's:

"Are ye able," said the Master, "to be crucified with me?"
"Yea," the sturdy dreamers answered, "To the death we follow thee."

"Are ye able to relinquish purple dreams of power and fame,
To go down into the Garden, or to die a death of shame?"

"Are ye able?" Still the Master whispers down eternity,
And heroic spirits answer, Now as then in Galilee:

"Lord, we are able, Our spirits are thine. Remold them, make us,
Like thee, Divine. Thy guiding radiance above us shall be
A beacon to God, to love and loyalty."

Jesus asks: "Are you able to follow me to the cross? Are you able to let go of misguided ideas of what true power and fame are all about?"

That song, like this text, has a double edge to it. On the one hand, Jesus does not put down these two eager disciples. We, like the other disciples, might get a little angry with them for their brashness. Or we might be annoyed because they yelled, "Shotgun!" on the Jesus Train before we did.

On the other hand, as the song and the Scripture reminds us, Jesus is bound for glory by a very difficult and arduous path. His victory is assured, but it is not easy. Those who go with him will have a full measure of suffering alongside of him and for his sake.

I think we are very similar to the disciples. We still have a hard time imagining what Jesus' reign is going to be like. We still have difficulty with the nature of power in the kingdom of God.

Too often we view Jesus' victory as if he has won the latest political election. We've thrown the old bums out of office and gotten our man in and now things will be different. But the larger reality is that Jesus' victory means the whole political process is thrown upside down. The Domination System by which the world has operated for so long has suddenly been reversed.

Jesus doesn't beat the pants off of Satan and then take over, wielding power like some of the depictions of his Second Coming might have us believe.

He is still the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world". He is still "the same: yesterday, today and forever". In him God has given us a picture of the way that love operates in a world that is in love with power.

If we want to ride shotgun with Jesus we need to remember that it is not a seat of honor. It is a seat of service to others. He is not like Yul Brynner driving the hearse up the hill. He is the one who is in the coffin, giving up his life for his people.

Those who want to follow him must be willing to give up winning and let go of their love of power in order to embrace the power of love and the tasks of a servant who trusts God completely and who is less concerned with where they sit in the kingdom than with how the kingdom sits with us.

Jesus calls us to a different way of life, a radical and life-relinquishing way. Jesus is asking: "So you want to be my right-hand people?" Good. "You have ambitions for working for the kingdom of God?" I can work with that.

"You are willing to follow me into paths of service and dedication to the least of these who are members of my family also?" Wonderful!

Have I got a job for you!

Let us pray.