

# God's Lieutenants

*Pentecost 21 B*

## **Mark 10:35-45**

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they 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. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but 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."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. 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. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

## **Isaiah 53:4-6, 12**

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases;  
yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.  
But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.  
All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way,  
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.  
He was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many,  
and made intercession for the transgressors.

Pastor Al is away today, spending some precious time with his family. So, we're doing things a little differently today. For one thing, we've had no "children's sermon." That's partly because Pastor Al has lots of practice at doing children's sermons and I don't. But it's also partly because the only sermon we're having this week is a kind of children's sermon, only I decided not to have you all come down front and sit on the chancel steps.

The other thing that's different today is that I'm not using any PowerPoint slides. I've never developed into a PowerPoint presenter or preacher, so in my case, at least, the old adage applies, that "power corrupts, and PowerPoint corrupts absolutely." Instead of slides, at a couple points today I'll ask you to imagine images we might have up on the screens.

So, we begin this children's sermon today by recalling what Pastor Al told the children up here on the chancel steps two weeks ago, when our gospel lesson was an earlier portion of the chapter from which we read again today, Mark 10. In that lesson, Mark told of little children coming to Jesus hoping he might touch them, but the disciples tried to shoo them away, thinking, apparently, that Jesus didn't have time for such trivialities. Pastor Al mused with the children (and the rest of us) that day about how children spend so much of their time and imaginations wishing they were grownups. But he also confessed that a great many adults spend an inordinate amount of time acting like children, or at least wishing they were young again.

I think that's quite right, and I invite you to imagine a couple images I might have put up on the screen. One of them would be a recent photo of my two-year-old grandson, wearing a pair of his dad's big shoes. We've all been there, right? Trying out all kinds of things we weren't quite up to handling yet. It starts with shoes, and ultimately leads to beverages, cars, and a host of other grownup things. As for adults behaving as children, well, I have lots of friends and neighbors who are Chicago Cubs fans, and I could have brought photos of their antics in recent days. But to be fair, the most fitting images would have been

of myself, at the annual costume party my wife and I attend with friends on New Year's Eve. (Sometimes it really is best not to have PowerPoint.)

In truth, no matter how many birthdays we've celebrated, we never seem fully satisfied—with our age, our circumstances, our place in the world. We're convinced others have it better than we do somehow, and if only we could get into their shoes, have their privileges, then we would be . . . what? Happy? Satisfied? Content?

But moments of satisfaction and contentment are rare, even when our dreams come true. When young, we want responsibility and power and more than anything, control over our own lives. But when we have responsibilities and a measure of control, those become burdens, and we dream of being carefree children, forgetting once more just how scary it is to be a child and live as vulnerably as children do in this world.

We have plenty of ways to address our anxieties, chief among them being politics and religion. We seek in every way possible to have as much control as we can get over our own lives and affairs. Among other things, we want our kind of people to be in charge, and we want the financial and military wings of our control systems to look out for our interests first of all.

We use religion for the same things. What the political machines can't control—like the dangers we face from diseases, accidents, and the plain capriciousness of the universe—we rely on God to take care of, so we work to have as good a relationship as possible with God. We try to be good, and on God's good side. And if we slip up sometimes, we can cook up a really good reason to explain why we should get a break this time. Yes, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, but some have fallen shorter than others, and we want some credit for not having fallen as far as all those others, don't we? You owe us, God!

So it is that our ancient brothers among Jesus' followers, James and John, who just a few verses earlier joined their peers in shooing away the children from Jesus, come to Jesus themselves and say, "We want you to give us whatever we ask." Does that sound like a sober, adult, Christian prayer? Or like childish begging? We are not surprised, then, to learn that what James and John really want is control, power, and authority. They want to be Jesus' lieutenants when he comes in his glory, one on his left, the other on his right. We'll help you run the world, Jesus!

They have an odd idea of God's job, or at least of Jesus' job, or what it will look like when he comes into his glory, which is the point of Jesus' question to James and John. "Can you drink the cup which I am to drink, or be baptized as I will be?" They answer, "Yes!! We surely can!" They think the "cup" and "baptism" have to do with privilege and comfort and freedom from threat and suffering.

That might work in the theological thinking of the ancient Greeks or other religions in which the gods were utterly uninterested in and unaffected by human affairs. But that's not the way it is with the God we have come to know in the stories of Israel and in the life and person of Jesus. The Bible teaches us over and over that God knows our suffering, experiences it, grieves over it, joins us in it.

So think about it. What would your job be if you did sit as God's lieutenants on either side of Jesus, the son of Man and judge of the nations? For one thing, God has to listen to everyone's prayers. Seven or so billion of us live on the planet today—and the largest number are fellow Christians. Everyone is praying, so imagine listening to all of it, even if you only listen to Christians praying.

Yes, some we can ignore—the prayers about ball games, for example, and lost car keys and iPhones that won't perform properly. But someone must listen to all the incessant, anxious prayers of those whose loved ones, including little children, are suffering and dying too young. "Lord, have mercy!" we cry to God all day and all night.

What about those who go to bed at night hungry, or aching from abuse, or caught in the middle of a violent war, and beg God for relief? Think of the pain and sorrow in the families around you and that you

know best, and then think of just one city's worth of all that suffering and anguish and the prayers that rise up in the midst of it? Can you listen? Can you respond? That's your job, if you're God or one of God's lieutenants.

As we all know too well, the prayers of the dying and their loved ones don't always seem to get the answer we most desire. Even Jesus, whose power James and John want to share, begs for his life later on in Mark's story, lying on the ground in Gethsemane pleading, "Let this cup pass from me! Your will, not mine, Lord, but please, not this!" He didn't get the answer he wanted either, and soon after, we hear him pray a different prayer as he dies, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" And there were indeed two guys next to Jesus then, one on his right and one on his left, stuck on crosses just like he was, in that moment when he comes into his strange kind of glory, so we who know the story understand exactly what James and John are really asking for in today's lesson, though they don't get it yet.

In the end, God doesn't exercise divine power and authority by rescuing us *from* our humanity or keeping us from knowing every pain and sorrow. Instead, God saves us *in* our humanity by joining us, in the person of Jesus Christ. In the very moments when it seems our prayers go unheard, and we are abandoned and tossed onto the waste heap of history, there we find ourselves with him, on his right and left. This moment of anguish on the cross in the darkness, Mark's gospel proclaims, is God's ultimate revelation. This is where God shows God's glory—right there, right here, in the darkness. Which means we are never alone, even there. That's what it means to find the Son of God enthroned in power and glory on a cross outside Jerusalem.

This is good news also because we who have drunk the cup Jesus drank and been baptized into his baptism don't have to respond to all the billions and billions of prayers directed at God in every moment of every day. God has already responded. The crucifixion of Jesus is God's ultimate answer.

But we, as those crucified with Christ and now living as his flesh and blood body in the world, do indeed listen and respond to the prayers and cries of those right around us, the ones that have words as well as the ones that the Spirit prays for us with cries too deep for words. We crucified people are always on the right and left of Jesus but also next to the rest of the suffering and brutalized ones in this world. We are bound to them by the promise of God. "You will drink the cup, and be baptized with my baptism," Jesus promised James and John and all the rest of us. He means to put us constantly on either side of all who suffer or cry out in search of meaning and purpose. Though we all walk through the valley of the shadow of death, no one goes alone. God is with us.

Right here in this room today, we can see God and the crucified Christ, the holy ones who never let us go or suffer alone, in the flesh and blood of each other. Whether we're trying to be older or younger, or working to have more control or less control, God will still use you—place you on a cross next to someone, at least for a while, so no one lives or dies alone, and we all get to drink his cup, and taste the bread of tomorrow, together.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.