

GREAT EXPECTATIONS
Sermon, March 25, 2018
Palm/Passion Sunday
Text: Matthew 20:17-28

Today is Palm Sunday, also known as Passion Sunday, the first day of Holy Week. Our English word "passion" comes from the Greek root "pascho" (πάσχω), which strictly means to suffer, endure, to undergo or experience difficulty." The English word also has its roots in the Latin *passio*, which similarly means "suffering;" its first recorded use is in early Latin translations of the Bible that appeared in the second century A.D. and specifically described the sufferings of Jesus during Holy Week (see *Acts 1:3*); it was then that the events of this final week of Jesus' earthly life started becoming known as the Passion. It really wasn't until the thirteenth century that "*passion*" was used to refer to any strong emotion, including love, hate, ardor and/or fanatical obsession. And it wasn't until 1988 that Passion became associated with a line of perfume by Elizabeth Taylor.

But it is appropriate this day to use "passion" in the broader English sense, because God's ardor, God's passion, God's love for His people is on display in the Passion! Jesus' suffering ... His Passion ... was born out of God's *passionate* love for you and for me. Probably more than any other Biblical author, the apostle John writes of this passionate love of God, so much so that John is often referred to as the Apostle of Love. Brief examples: John 3:16 --- *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have life full, abundant and eternal. For God did not send His son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.*" And in his first epistle, I John 4, *"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar! This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him we love because He first loved us."*

Now, we just read an interesting account involving this very same John, which took place the night before Palm Sunday. We're told a particular woman, a woman who happened to be John's mother, comes to Jesus and says, *"Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right hand and the other at your left in your kingdom."* In other words, *"Jesus, when you come into power I want my sons, James and John, these two disciples of yours, to sit one on your right and one on your left."* These, by the way, are positions of power and political influence ... she had great expectations for her boys, and thought they deserved these spots.

Now, just who is she? We are told she is the *"mother of Zebedee's sons."* And we know Zebedee's sons are the disciples James and John. We find out more about her by comparing Matthew, Mark and John's Gospel accounts of the women who were later at the cross of Jesus; this same woman was there. Matthew 27:56 names her *"the mother of Zebedee's sons,"* just as he does in today's passage. Mark 15:40 identifies her by name; he calls her Salome. And John's Gospel, whose author is this woman's son (according to the consensus of traditional biblical scholars), identifies her in John 19:25 as the sister of Jesus' mother. So, this means that Salome, Zebedee's wife, John's mother, is Jesus' ... aunt! This is Jesus' Auntie Salome, which makes her two sons, John and James, Jesus' (*much*) younger cousins. So apparently Auntie Salome is trying to exert a little family influence here with her potentially politically powerful nephew to get her boys some special royal treatment!

Jesus replied, addressing His aunt and two younger cousins, *"You really don't know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"* Suffice it to say for now, they understood this imagery; they understood this euphemism. They knew this was Jesus' way of asking, *"Can you endure the suffering that I am going to endure? Can you drink from the cup of suffering?"* The boys answered, with all the youthful, energetic (and slightly naive) optimism of their young years, *"We sure can!"* After a pause, Jesus replies, and I'm sure with a note of sad affection and a prophet's eye to the future, *"Yes, you will indeed drink from my cup."*

This has a bit of a double meaning, part of which we've looked into on past Maundy Thursdays. For now I'll just point out we know, from the vantage point of history, that they would indeed suffer ... James was, in fact, the first of the disciples to die a martyr's death. We read in Acts 12 that he was put to death by the sword by command of Herod Agrippa. John, too, would also go on to face much suffering, persecution and torture; he would also live to endure seeing all his fellow apostles die horrible martyrs' deaths. He was the only apostle to die a natural death, but that wasn't for lack of his persecutors trying to kill him. Tradition has it he lived well into his nineties, living his

final years in exile on the isle of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. Jesus continued, “*You will indeed drink My cup, but to sit at My right hand and My left is not for Me to grant. Those places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by My Father.*”

We are told that when the other ten disciples heard about this request, they weren’t happy. They were indignant. Everyone is on edge anyway, because Jerusalem was not a safe place for them to go, and injected into this tense atmosphere is this brash irritant of ambitious political maneuvering by these younger disciples. We know from other sources that James and John are the youngest disciples, John the youngest of them all; some scholars speculate he may have been only sixteen or seventeen at the time. That’s why in many of the paintings of the apostolic band, particularly Leonardo’s Last Supper, there are usually two disciples without beards. These two are beardless not because they have shaved; they are beardless because they haven’t shaved yet! (*And no, Dan Brown, that’s not Mary Magdalene in drag in Leonardo’s Last Supper, as you would have us believe in your Davinci Code fantasy: that’s the beardless, not-shaving-yet youngster John.*) James and John, the sons of Zebedee and Salome, they’re the young’uns of the apostolic band. Earlier on in the Gospels, Jesus gave them a nickname; He called them “Sons of Thunder.” This was not meant to be a flattering nickname, by the way; it more than likely was a reference to their youthful thunderous temperaments which were always rumbling and ready to explode about something, their impetuous impatience, their short fuses. In Luke 9 we read John and James wanted to call down some heavenly fire and lightning to destroy some disagreeable Samaritans who did not welcome them; these Sons of Thunder just wanted to blast away those ornery heretics in the Samaritan Presbytery. And added to this mix is they apparently have a very ambitious mother who is not shy about requesting special favors because she’s a relative, and we can be sure the rest of the disciples have probably just about had enough of these two, especially on this tension-filled night!

Jesus does a remarkable thing with this scene. He doesn’t really scold his aunt, nor does He admonish these two boys. He takes that bad moment and *redeems* it ... Jesus has a way of taking all His followers’ bad moments and redeeming them, but that’s almost another sermon. He redeems it by making this moment a great teaching moment. More accurately, He makes it a teaching moment about what is truly great. True greatness is measured not by position or power; it is measured by love and giving and sacrifice and service to God and others. With apologies to Charles Dickens, these are the TRUE Great Expectations; the expectations of true greatness. Don’t be motivated by the power to coerce, by the power to enforce, by the power to control, by the power to punish or threaten. Be motivated by the desire to do whatever you can to set things right, to make things better, and more often than not that is done by our loving service, not by bossing others around, by giving, not by manipulating. As Jesus taught in verse twenty-five, “*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you! Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.*” And He may well have added, “*Remember this tomorrow when all the crowds are cheering ‘Hosanna.’*”

There’s a nice epilogue to this story: Again, the consensus of traditional scholarship believes that John, this younger Zebedee brother, is the author of the Gospel and the three epistles that bear his name; we read from John’s first epistle at the outset of this sermon. This son of Zebedee and Salome, this ambitious, temperamental, hot-headed, impetuous, intolerant Son of Thunder who once wanted to blast away some disagreeable Samaritans ... that’s John! Yet, this once ambitious, stormy and slightly narcissistic young man is the one who more than any other New Testament writer writes so eloquently about the gracious, merciful, redemptive, patient love of God, and he was almost reticent to put himself forward in his writings. He is the *only* disciple not mentioned by name in the fourth gospel; when he does enter his own narrative, it is indirectly. We read in the fourth gospel about the nameless “*disciple whom Jesus loved.*” It is more than likely John identified himself that way because he wished to emphasize that he is the changed man he is precisely and only *because* Jesus loved him. This was John’s way of humbly saying that apart from Jesus’ special love and attention, he would have continued to be an ornery, obnoxious, intolerant, ill-tempered, self-ambitious, narcissistic, full of himself sinner, instead of the patient, loving, gentle, godly, even-tempered, selfless and gracious gentleman so evident in his writings. Seen in this sense, it is a self-deprecating observation that he was the disciple Jesus loved, because he is probably saying that more than the other eleven, he was probably the one most in need of Jesus’ attention; more than anyone else in that band, he was in special need of Jesus’ redemptive, passionate love.

And on the eve of Jesus’ triumphal entry, John learned from Jesus the expectation of true greatness ... that we are not called to lord it over others in power, we’re called to serve others in love. In short, if we would do great things, we need to learn what it means to serve, and to serve well; we need to learn what it means to love, and to love well. Because even Jesus did not come to be served, but He came to serve ... and as the events of this Holy Week commemorate, this King of Kings came to serve by giving His life as a ransom for many.