

“Sons Of Thunder”

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Mark 9:2-10 = the sons of thunder

I've met the disciples James and John. No, I don't have a time machine. Rather I met their modern incarnations, years ago while backpacking in Philmont Scout Ranch. I was an adult leader on a trek there with my son's troop.



Neither of these incarnate disciples was with the program. Like Jesus mentoring his disciples, Philmont is a group experience, building teamwork and encouraging leadership. On the other hand, these two adolescents, David and John, never got past being individuals. Young, immature, first-class whiners. Much like James and John the disciples whom Jesus dubbed the 'sons of thunder.'



I nicknamed those two campers the 'sons of thunder,' for they messed up constantly and yet thought of themselves as perfect. We also called them the "superscouts" on account of in their own eyes, they were experts on everything.

Almost every conversation turned to one-upmanship. "I'm the best." "No, I'm the best." And so on day after day. In actuality their camping skills were merely marginal. They were so sure of their superiority that they felt entitled to ignore the rules. They were constantly distracting themselves. David and John often missed important warnings and instructions.

Ever known anyone like that?

In fact they were big mess-ups. John forgot his pack cover and rain protection. Their tent was not the best. John was the first to slip on a log bridge; last out of the tent each day; last out of camp; first to complain; first to demand a rest.

John tried to pawn off his share of the load on someone else. Hording. Always trying to give orders, a



bit of a bully. Trying not so subtle ways to manipulate the trek leader. Constantly annoying.

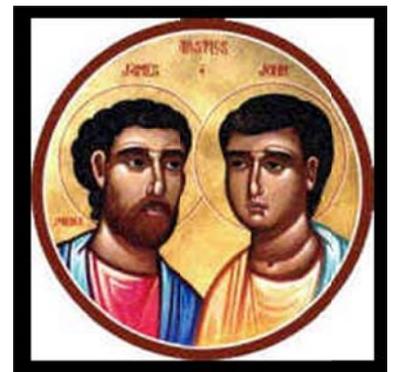
David on the other hand was quieter but no less manipulative. David never listened. Cardinal rule in bear country: !!NEVER LEAVE FOOD IN YOUR PACK!! David did. And guess what. A bear dragged it off one night. Luckily no one hurt, but David was one chastened adolescent after finding his pack and clothes torn and spread over the campsite.



Yet in perfect character with James and John the Disciples coming down the mountain after witnessing Jesus lifted up and transfigured, there they were, these two “supercampers,” jostling, running, pushing, bickering, practically racing down the mountain to be the winners, the first back in base camp. In the end, due to tripping over each other and bickering, they end up last when they wearily trudge into base camp.

Jesus is right: those obsessed with being first shall be last.

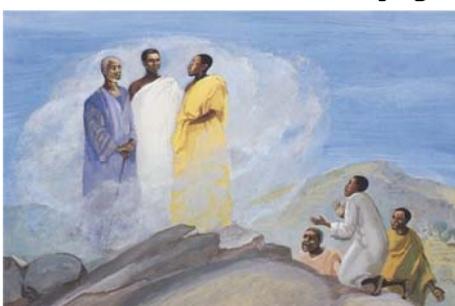
Have you known disciples like James and John? You probably have met them, their personalities are common. In our world driven by greed and lust for power, there are many Johns and Jameses. Jesus nicknamed them “the sons of thunder”¹ because of their quick tempers and their aggressive, manipulative behaviors. One highly typical incident, James and John demanded of Jesus:



“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”²

At several points, these disciples James and John were variously described as jockeying for places of authority, always pulling against the grain, vying for status, demanding to become judges at the last judgment. Quick to give offense, even quicker to take offense.

Peter usually gets the limelight. James and John are often overlooked, but



these three together are the first and foremost leaders of the movement Jesus founded. None of them ever seems to get it. The sons of thunder major in action, Peter is impulsive.

Despite their shortcomings and failures, these three are Jesus' choice for leaders, his inner circle, his cabinet. These three and only these three were permitted to go up the mountain with Jesus. These three and only these three were eyewitnesses to the healing of Jairus' daughter. These three and only these three went a little farther and were in the inner garden with Jesus in his night of travail in Gethsemane.

So why did Jesus choose these three to go up the mountain?

I met incarnations of James and John at Philmont Scout Ranch. Yet our Gospel story is not just a story about avarice, manipulation and whining, but it is a story of transformation.



Everyone has undoubtedly known someone like James and John. Closer to home, each of us from time to time can become a disciple like James and John. I must admit I find myself there from time to time.

We all start out in the faith as adolescents, all of us as ill prepared as those self-acclaimed "superscouts." But the story of the disciples James and John isn't over yet. God isn't finished with us as well. Today we read how Peter, James and John despite all their shortcomings were singularly blessed by being invited to Jesus' transfiguration.

While avoiding Peter's foot-in-mouth response, James and John were nevertheless dumbfounded and speechless; scared witless by their fears. Paralyzed to act, and wanting to flee but still too afraid to take even a step.



The portrait of John the younger son of Zebedee is that of a striving and ambitious young man. That is until he witnesses the resurrection. Tradition has it that John went on to become the gifted leader of the Jerusalem church after his brother was killed. Tradition also says he lived to a ripe, old age in Ephesus. What we do know with certainty is that he dramatically changed on seeing Jesus rise from the dead.

Early on James the son of Zebedee was also equally envious, striving and ambitious as his brother. Yet in Acts James is the first of the Apostles to die for the faith. He also had had a watershed change in his life on coming face-to-face with the risen Jesus.

The Gospel message at its center is all about change ~ realm of God change ~ changed lives and changed communities.

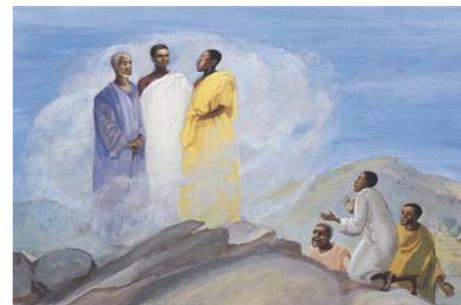
Fact: some of us are Jonahs. Some Thomases, some Mary of Magdala, some Peter, some Mary or Martha of Bethany, some Andrew and some Mary the mother of Jesus. And yes, some of us are James and John who join up with Jesus because we see it as a source of gain, who come in anticipating



power and the glory of revolution. While many of us think we say no to the power motive, nonetheless many consciously or unconsciously join the movement on account of its central place in our culture and the social status which comes with it.

Nevertheless even as competitive and status conscious as they were, James and John were yet transformed, changed, molded into something else, something better. We too whatever our motivation for becoming a follower of Jesus, we can be changed as well into something else, something better.

The bottom line for the church always has been, always will be, is exclusively *changed lives*. We have to ask ourselves how many lives have been changed by the message of the Gospel here at GPC. We have to ask ourselves as individuals how many lives have been changed by the Gospel on our watch.



We don't have to wait until the last trumpet to be changed. Don't have to wait for the fulfillment of the God's realm, nor meeting God face-to-face in the next life.

God's power to mold us, shape us, change us into the persons God wants us to be, the time is now. Transformation is available now. We don't have to wait for some dramatic moment ~ the dramatic moments have all already happened ~ Jesus levitating above a mountaintop with Moses and Elijah. Jesus crucified, dead and yet Jesus lives! Jesus transfigured. Jesus transformed.

Yes, God's transforming us is now.

¹ Mark 3:17

² Mark 10:37