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St. James', Mt. Airy
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Proper 24/B
Job 38:1-7 (34-41)
Hebrews 5:1-10
Mark 10:35-45

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

One of my favorite seminary words is pericope, which autocorrect always wants to change to periscope.

And that's actually not a bad image to have – a periscope helps you see things that are otherwise out of your field of vision, reaching up and out.

The word pericope literally means 'a cutting out' – as in 'taken out of context.'

Our lectionary readings each week are periscopes – little chunks of story taken from the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament, and the Gospels – that are cut out and placed side by side for our edification.

This week's Gospel pericope is one that leans more to the side of 'taken out of context' rather than just 'cut out,' and so in order to look forward we must first look back.

Beginning in chapter 8 of Mark's Gospel, a pattern is developed that gives deeper meaning to what may seem to be isolated events when we pull them out and read them separately:

- First came the healing of a blind man at Bethsaida.
- Then Jesus told the disciples for the first time about his death and resurrection
- Which was immediately followed by Peter putting his foot in his mouth when he rebuked Jesus for saying such things, and in turn Jesus said that infamous line, "Get behind me Satan!" before then telling them all to take up their cross and follow him.
- Next Jesus told the disciples for the second time about his death and resurrection
- This time all the disciples got in on the craziness together and debated among themselves who was the greatest, to which Jesus responded, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."
- After that Jesus foretold his death and resurrection for a third time
- This is where today's pericope falls – James and John are the inappropriate ones this time, asking Jesus to be seated on his right and left, to which Jesus again teaches about servant leadership.
- Finally, there comes the healing of blind Bartimaeus

We see here, the last part of Mark before the entry into Jerusalem and Jesus' Passion, a pattern that begins and ends with sight being restored, while in the middle we encounter Jesus making a final effort to open the eyes of his friends to what is coming, and their seeming blindness to what he is pointing toward.

Seeing today's pericope in this context makes James and John's question so much more than a first century version of calling 'shotgun.'

Yes, on the surface their request seems self-absorbed and really rather clueless –Jesus has just told them for the *third time* that he will meet his death in Jerusalem. And we can read this like another case of the disciples just not getting it one more time. But could it be something else?

In the larger pattern could this very well be a key moment of understanding and discipleship, just like Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah several verses earlier?

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. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, 'See, 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; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.' 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.'¹

What do you see when we make *this* our pericope?

¹ Mark 10: 32-35, NRSV.

I see that those who followed Jesus were afraid and getting closer to Jerusalem with every step. I see two of them who are remembering that in order to save their lives they must lose them, and that in order to be first they must be servant to all. I see James and John, nervous, and so approaching Jesus with their request rather sheepishly.

And I see two brothers who have left everything behind to follow Jesus, who now ask to follow him to the very end so they might sit next to him always – despite their fears.

I imagine Jesus giving them a good hard look in the eye before saying, “*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 immediately responded, “*We are able.*”

Again Jesus pauses. In my mind he closes his eyes and takes a centering breath before turning to them and replying, “*The cup that I drink you will drink; and 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 is for those for whom it has been prepared.*”

It is not a threat that Jesus makes, but a **promise**. A promise that their faith is seen, and just as Jesus will tell blind Bartimaeus in next week’s pericope that ‘his faith has made him well,’ so too their faith will empower them to follow him the rest of the way, even to the end.

The profoundness of the moment the three friends shared is shattered when the rest of the disciples, who have *heard* the conversation, but not really *listened* to what has been said, begin to grumble and get angry with James and John. How dare they ask to sit at Jesus left and right? Didn't we all just have a conversation about who among us was the greatest, and look, these two think it's them!

And so it is that Jesus makes his clearest statement yet of what **he**, and **they**, and **we**, are called to do and be in the world.

“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.”

To serve and to be slaves. This, he tells the gathered group, is the way it is among you, if you are to follow me.

To follow a servant Messiah, one must also be a servant.

We are called to be servants and slaves. Servant, from the Greek *diakonos*, and slave, from the Greek *doula*. For Mark, these are the hallmarks of discipleship.

What could that mean for us? For years the ‘priesthood of all believers’ has been a phrase and image used to ignite the ministry of all the baptized in the Episcopal Church. But how about the ‘*diakonia* of all believers?’

Our word deacon comes from *diakonos*, and in the ordination service for deacons we are exhorted that part of the role of deacons is to make Christ's redemptive love known by word and example, and to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world. In this way deacons hold up a mirror – reflecting God's love and showing clearly the places in need in the world around us, and not only inspire, but lead us to the places of most need.

These are essential aspects of being a deacon in the church, but they are not things limited to deacons only.

When the Outreach Team gets together and looks at the needs of the community they are interpreting to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world. When our Youth Group rises up to lead our community to support a peer who is facing a challenging diagnosis and course of treatment, they are interpreting to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world.

It is the work of the entire body of Christ, and when we bring in food for Mt. Airy Net, or help to clothe a family in need, we are all enacting the *diakonia* of all believers.

And what of being doulas? Does anyone know what a doula is, today in our context? Doulas are trained professionals who provide support, experience and information leading up to, during, and after childbirth.

It's not as common of an image in the church, but I think it is one that holds great wonder and promise.

The work of doulas in the church, like the deacons, is centered in making God's love known, and in doing so – offering healing and reconciliation.

Doulas are the ones who are the wisdom keepers, who know the *deep* history of the community, who use these to nurture the birth of *new* ways for being community and serving the world that rise up among us.

There is a *doulania* of all believers (yes, I totally just made that word up), then, can be understood as the role of everyone in the community to assist in change that is rooted in experience.

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Deacons and doulas, called to heal the world and spread the promise of God's extravagant love – the giving of service and faith that offers transformation for the world and for our very selves.

Knowing this, would you not consider saying to Jesus too, “*Lord, grant that I may sit beside you in your glory.*”?

Have we not said in various times and ways in our lives, “*We are able.*”?

All because when Jesus said, ‘*come and follow me,*’ we too answered that call and joined the journey of the followers of *The Way*, stumbling at times but returning again when needed, so that we also are called disciples and Jesus’ promise to James and John is a promise to us as well.

This is stewardship season, when we are all asked to take time to pray about the ways we can pledge to give our time and money in the coming year to support the mission and ministry of St. James’.

We are beginning a new journey of ministry together, one where we are beginning by remembering our *deep roots* as we dream and plan for *new shoots*. As such, and after a time of transition, we are setting a high goal for our giving campaign. In addition, it will take the time and talents of all of us to tend the new shoots.

To do all of this will take more of our collective time and money – two things that our culture tells us are always a scarcity. God tells us something different.

God’s way is the way of abundance – an understanding that in giving, we receive, in service we inhabit the holy.

And no matter how we cut it, **that** is a truth that can never be taken out of context.

~ AMEN ~