

*Destinations* --- Reebee Kavich, October 22, 2000

Mark 10:32-45

On Tuesday, I was driving back from Newton, pleased that I had crossed a major item off my to-do list. I didn't consult my road map, so when, as I was headed from Newton Center to Cambridge, I passed over the Waban town line, I wasn't all that concerned. Something felt a little off – I didn't recognize the landmarks – but it was another ten minutes before I turned around to backtrack. Well, I obviously made it back to Cambridge, but on the way I passed large bodies of water I didn't recognize, waved at folks on the Boston Common, and at one point was very relieved to see a sign indicating that I was not heading toward Worcester. Once I was on the wrong road, it was so hard to get back on the right one. Perhaps what takes place in this morning's passage is that Jesus recognizes that James and John are on the wrong road, and Jesus tries to provide his disciples – and us – with a roadmap pointing to our destination, and the landmarks we'll encounter along the way.

When Jesus describes being killed, he is talking about a critical moment in his journey. When he predicts the resurrection and in other passages describes the kingdom of God, Jesus is naming the *destination* of that journey. Furthermore he is urging his disciples to enter into that journey with him. It's confusing and frustrating to me that James and John misunderstand Jesus' destination and the key moments in the journey, because Jesus has spent a lot of time describing these things to the disciples. Jesus has talked about the kingdom of God. Three times Jesus makes a straightforward, if difficult, prediction about his coming death, and here for the third time, the disciples have missed the point completely. From James' and John's comments in this passage it seems they have different ideas about the culmination of this journey. Wouldn't you guess from our reading that James and John have all along been thinking about a different conclusion to Jesus' ministry? Jesus has been talking about building a kingdom; James and John have been fantasizing about arriving in glory. Jesus has been healing people, feeding people, teaching and inviting people, and trying to get the disciples prepared for his death and resurrection; James and John have been thinking about which side of him they should sit on when he has his worldly triumph. And yet, James and John think that they and Jesus are looking forward to the same destination.

Kingdom and glory, kingdom and glory, for thine be the kingdom and the power and the glory. We says these words together in the same breath every week. But glory as envisioned by James and John in this morning's passage is not close to the kingdom, so let's set aside how linked the words are in the Lord's prayer – and look at how far apart the ideas are in today's passage.

First, we turn to this notion of glory. It is worthwhile to note that some versions of Mark use the word triumph rather than the word glory.<sup>1</sup> Together these words imply that James and John are fantasizing about an earthly glory, with the triumphant king that their sacred scriptures predicted and which they had come to believe Jesus would be. Perhaps we should give James and John the benefit of the doubt and say that they knew this triumph was to come after the death and

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<sup>1</sup> Comments regarding etymology in this sermon are derived from the Anchor Bible, C.S. Mann.

resurrection of their teacher. But I find it far more likely that they had pushed aside Jesus' predictions of his suffering and death, and were still somehow imagining a triumphal entry into Jerusalem which would continue directly into a glorious overthrow of the Roman occupying forces in Israel. These guys, in short, were getting their purple robes ready and thinking about the moment when they would get to sit back and drink the fine wine and eat the gourmet food they would find in an earthly palace.

And what of Jesus' destination? We know with the benefit of hindsight unavailable to the disciples that when Jesus spoke of a kingdom, over and over in the Gospels, it was not a kingdom in the traditional sense: there would not be a materialistic triumph such as they anticipated. Jesus was moving toward a kingdom, all right, but it was not an earthly one. And the triumph was an eternal one, over death, not a temporal one, over a physical place or a human occupation force. Further, Jesus made it clear that in the temporal sense, the worldly sense, preparation for the kingdom was exactly the opposite of the preparation for an earthly kingdom: discipleship on the road to the kingdom Jesus' referred to meant denying oneself and taking up the task of service to others. Already in Mark, Jesus has challenged Peter for setting his mind on things that are human instead of divine. But James and John seem to have repeated the mistake.

In the same way that the destinations they are contemplating are so different, we can surmise that so are the paths they believe they are walking. Because, *if you change your destination, how you get there changes, too*. You don't get to Walden Pond and the Boston Common by the same route, you don't get to Minneapolis and London by the same interstate, you don't get to the kingdom and to the glory by the same route either. And it is the route to the true kingdom that Jesus tries to draw James and John back to when he says, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" Jesus is describing the route which includes his death and resurrection, and the route to the kingdom and *it is not an easy one*. The cup is a cup of suffering, an idea paralleled elsewhere in the Gospels. Baptism had not only ritual significance to this community, but the word itself in first century Greek carried connotations of being flooded or overwhelmed. So, when Jesus used the words cup and baptism he wasn't talking about a refreshing and delicious drink, nor about a celebratory ritual. He was talking about suffering, being overwhelmed by suffering, dying, and then finally being resurrected. Let me take a moment to clarify that suffering was not the goal of Jesus' ministry – it was not the destination – but rather a known consequence of his liberating activities. Suffering was a landmark on the road. But his suffering and death were such frightful ideas, and the resurrection such an abstract concept that the disciples could not figure out what they had to do with the mission of which they were a part. Remember at the beginning of this passage we heard, "they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid." The road that leads to success and glory is attractive. And the destination that Jesus spoke of – crucifixion and martyrdom loom over that road – and the hope of the resurrection is so distant for James and John. And so they focused on earthly glory.

Jesus asks them if they are up to the challenges on the road to the kingdom. And what was the response of James and John to this challenging question? "We are able." Every time I read this

passage they sound more chipper. Their response is quick, confident. And you know without doubt that when Jesus heard it he knew his point had been misunderstood: that these disciples grasped neither the destination nor the route they would take to get there.

When someone gives you directions, they usually tell you the direction you'll travel, the method you'll use to get there, and some of the landmarks you'll see on the way. Jesus has told his followers what direction to travel, and what some of the landmarks will be.

"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; 34 they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."

At the end of this passage, Jesus reiterates the method the disciples will use to get to the kingdom: the method of service. "Whoever wishes to become great among you," (read: if you really want to get to the kingdom), "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 give his life a ransom for many."

Now, while once again sharing what will happen to him, Jesus is connecting even more directly his disciples' future to his. Take up service, Jesus says. Follow in my ways which are the ways of service, justice, healing, teaching, and sharing the love of God. Accept that it will be difficult and you may suffer as a consequence. But keep working your way to the kingdom – and bring with you as many of your sisters and brothers as your able.

So what happened to James and John? By most accounts, they were martyred for the cause of the early church. This is a tragedy, but it points out to us that they came to hear the message Jesus was conveying, picked up the call to service, and stepped back on the road to the kingdom.

It's a rare circumstance for people to be killed for their Christian faith in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the United States. So martyrdom is fortunately no longer an expected or accepted landmark on the journey of Christian faith. But *service* is still the method we employ to get to the kingdom. When we are able to make someone safer, healthier, happier through our actions, we are called to act. When we witness injustice in a relationship, in a community, in a nation – we are called to testify against it and seek ways of restoring justice and peace. We are called to do these things even if it means our own lives will be affected as a consequence. Jesus modeled this for us. And Christians in this century are models for us as well: those who were named "Righteous Among the Nations" for saving the lives of Jews during the Holocaust; Barbara de Souza, written of in today's UCC mission calendar feature, who is a women's health care educator in Rio de Janeiro; or Helen Sellers, a woman I know from Nashville who spends hours every day in prayers for her neighbors – and everyone is her neighbor.

We have the opportunity to serve all the time, in every hour of our day. When we give a sandwich or resource information to a homeless person; when we teach a child about love, and justice and peace; when we pray for and visit someone who is sick: these are moments when we are

serving someone and we are serving God. And our faith calls us to be ready to serve when the challenges are more difficult as well. When, motivated by Christian love, we serve others, we are moving toward the kingdom. We need to challenge ourselves to keep traveling down that road.

Are you – am I – are we headed in the right direction? Is our destination the kingdom of God that Jesus described and invited us to? Or is our destination the glory in that James and John looked forward to in this morning's reading? If our destination is truly the kingdom of God, are we traveling by the method of service?

Friends, what is your destination?