

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
October 21, 2018  
Pentecost 22  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 53:1-12  
Psalm 91:9-16  
Hebrews 4:12-16  
Mark 10:35-45

In our Gospel lesson today, James and John come to Jesus with what appears to be a ridiculous request. It is ridiculous to us because we have the benefit of hindsight. But still, James and John hardly know what they are asking of Jesus. They are thinking in terms of how the Gentiles rule, of royal privileges and honors.

But as Christ has been trying to show them, the road to his kingdom is by way of his cross. To share in his glory, James and John (and all of us) must be willing to drink the cup that he drinks.

The image of the “cup” is manifold in Scripture. In some cases, it has a positive connotation, such as in Psalm 23, where the Psalmist’s cup runs over with the blessing of God.

But in many other cases in Scripture, the cup conjures up images of God’s judgment. In Jeremiah 25, the wicked will be made to drink the cup of God’s judgment for their sins:

*Thus the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword which I am sending among them. [Jer. 25:15-16]*

In a similar fashion, the prophet Isaiah pronounces a similar judgment on Jerusalem, when he says:

*Rouse yourself, rouse yourself, stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk at the hand of the LORD the cup of his wrath, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl of staggering.* [Isaiah 51:17]

As Jesus responds to James and John's request here, he asks them if they are able to drink the cup he is about to drink. They answer that they are, but they do not understand what Jesus is talking about.

Calling on images from the Old Testament, Jesus is trying to tell James and John that he has come to drink the cup of God's judgment on behalf of all humanity. He has come to be baptized – to be plunged and immersed – into the sufferings we all deserve for our sins. So Jesus says in Luke's Gospel, when he says: *I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how I am constrained until it is accomplished.* (Luke 12:50)

In drinking the cup of God's wrath for all humanity, Jesus will fulfill the prophecy we heard in today's Old Testament lesson from Isaiah. Jesus will be the suffering servant, who will give his life as an offering for sin, even as Israel's priests offered sacrifices for the sins of the people (cf. Lev. 5:17-19).

But unlike the priests of Israel, Jesus is the heavenly High Priest of all humanity. We are reminded of this in today's epistle lesson from Hebrews. Whereas Israel's priests offered the blood of goats and calves in the temple

sanctuary, Jesus entered the heavenly sanctuary with his own blood. As the writer of Hebrews says:

*But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come...he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ...purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.* [Heb. 9:11-14]

James and John may not understand Jesus' language about drinking the cup, and all that it will mean. But hopefully our hindsight can help us to understand. Jesus, as the great High Priest, offered his own life in order to redeem all of us from slavery to sin and death.

Now, in closing, I want to offer a *practical application* of Jesus' words to James and John here that may seem a bit startling to you. But hear me out.

Jesus asks James and John, "Are you able to drink of the bitter cup of sorrow that I am about to drink?"

And in his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul tells them, "Do you not know that all of who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Rom. 6:3)

Paul also tells the Romans: *It is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and*

*fellow heirs with Christ, provided that we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.* (Rom. 16-17)

The entire tenor of the New Testament is such that to follow Jesus Christ, to be baptized into Jesus Christ, is in some profound way to *share in his life*, not just spiritually or metaphorically, but *mystically and actually*.

And as Jesus and the apostles make clear, sharing in his life involves not merely sharing in his victory, but also sharing in his *sufferings*. In fact, in one of the most enigmatic statements in all of Scripture, the Apostle Paul tells the Colossians: *I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my body I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister...* (Col. 1:24)

With this in mind, let me ask you a question this morning. Let me ask: How do you view the trials and sufferings that confront you in your life? To be sure, none of us enjoys facing trial and hardship. And to be more sure, none of us enjoys enduring suffering.

Remember the story of Bev Schipper that I told a few weeks ago? Remember how she was stricken with an unexplained illness that became a 15 year marathon of debilitating pain?

How do we explain that? Where would that experience fit into our conceptual grid as Christians? What possible purpose could there be for it?

Based upon Jesus' words to James and John, and the other evidence from the New Testament, let me offer you a possible answer: *We should look upon our trials and sufferings as our portion of the cup he promised to those who believe in him.* We should view our trials and sufferings as an opportunity to remember that we have been baptized into his passion and death.

Some of you today may be going through fiery trial. Some of you may be suffering physically and emotionally. If not, you may know others who are.

As we come to the Table this morning, let me encourage you to offer up your suffering to Jesus. See if not so much as a hostile, foreign invader of your life, but instead see it as part and parcel of what it means to be baptized into Jesus' death. See your suffering not as something from which to be *delivered*, but as something Christ calls on you to *share* with him.

And here at the Table, you share something else with Christ. You share his divine life, offered up to you in the material things of bread and wine. You share in his strength, a strength sufficient for your present challenges, and for whatever tomorrow may bring.

So come with faith. Let us lift up the cup of salvation, share it together, and call upon the Name of the Lord.

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