

✠ I preach in God's name for God's people. Let my words be from God and for God's people. **Amen**

Good evening.

**Last** Wednesday we heard about Moses receiving the Law, about Elijah fasting for forty days, and about the Sign of Jonah. We also heard lots of numbers: 7, 40, 3.

That Seven reminds us of Creation, reminds us that God designed, ordered, and organized the cosmos intelligently, and therefore that the world is *intelligible*. We can make sense of it. As intelligible as the world is, we have more confidence in God's Word, because his Word is steadfast, reliable, certain, true. His Word endures forever. God *purposes*; God is purposeful.

That's why the numbers in the Bible are intelligible; that's why they mean something. Every story of 3's and every story of 40's adds to and clarifies the meaning—and calls to mind the stories from before. Jonah's three days in the belly of the fish; Jesus' three days in the grave. The forty days & nights of the flood; the forty days of Jesus' Temptation in the wilderness.

Three days has to do with death & resurrection; forty days has to do with judgment & salvation.

Forty days is the right number for the season of Lent—the season of penitence and preparation. We judge ourselves—and repent!—lest we be judged. We take up practices to nourish our faith, lest we be found to have cast aside the seeds of faith, lest we be found to have abandoned our salvation.

**The** chief spiritual tool which we have been hearing about—for the purpose of strengthening our faith—is fasting. Remember—our ancestors Adam & Eve did not fast from that forbidden fruit. But our Lord Jesus did fast—from food & drink for forty days. What makes any of us think that his fasting is not worth imitating? Are we really more prepared than our Lord that we can endure without fasting?

Barring some significant health reason, I recommend fasting from food for your soul. But as we have been hearing, we may need to fast from any number of other things: from news, social media, TV, Netflix, shopping. And this past Sunday, we heard that the Canaanite woman fasted from her pride.

Her daughter was severely oppressed from a demon. She knew Jesus was the Messiah; she knew he could save her daughter; and she demonstrated her great faith because she didn't care where she ranked in the kingdom of God—so long as Christ saved her daughter.

But the same was not true of the Pharisees. They kept asking for signs from Jesus, not because they wanted to believe, but because they wanted to keep dismissing his signs. (As if to say, "See, this is why we don't need to believe *this* sign or *that* sign. This doesn't prove anything!) Even worse, they *assumed* they were in the kingdom, when in fact, they continued to place themselves outside of God's kingdom. The Canaanite woman knew she did not belong to Israel, but nevertheless knew she would be saved by Israel's King.

We want the humility of the Canaanite woman. We do not want the pride of the Pharisees. But it's not so easy as just saying that, is it? Pride has a way of returning at the exact moment when you think you've at last had success over it.

Pride. Humility. Greatness. God's Kingdom. These are the themes again show up in this evening's Gospel, where we encounter yet another mother asking Jesus for something.

**The** mother of James & John—seemingly seeing that Christ's Kingdom is ever nearer—asks Jesus that he rank them second and third in his kingdom. It's a bold request, but it's immediately relatable. What mother does not think her children are the greatest?

To some extent, she has a case—her sons are James and John, after all. They were with Jesus, alongside Peter, at the Transfiguration. They're two of the inner three disciples. Only Peter could outbid one of them for the greatest spots, so perhaps it's not a stretch for this mother to ask Jesus for her sons to have the greatest spots.

It's clear that for the mother of James & John, just as for the Canaanite woman, both mothers want the best for their children. Yet whereas the Canaanite woman was content to be the least in the kingdom, so long as she was *in* the kingdom, the mother of our story wanted her sons to be the greatest. Is this too much to ask?

*“Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.”*

Jesus doesn't dismiss the question; he makes sure she—and her sons—understand the question first:

*Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?”*

Her request seems abrupt to me, because it comes right after Jesus has again let his disciples know the plan: they will go to Jerusalem, and then he will die. Jesus *will ascend* his throne in Jerusalem, just as his disciples and this mother believe, but his coronation ceremony is the cross—it's his death on the cross that inaugurates Christ as the King. The path to glory is *through* suffering. So it is for Christ, and so it is for all who would be Christ's disciples. He will drink the cup of judgment, of suffering, and of death.

Jesus asks: “Are you, James & John, ready to drink *this* cup?” The brothers say, “yes.” They still do not quite know what is coming. But Jesus encourages them all the same; in the end, the brothers do drink from this cup. James is martyred. John is not martyred, but suffers immensely. They go to their graves as faithful followers. They will be raised from the dead as heirs of the kingdom.

But not yet. For now—as Jesus & his disciples make their journey to Jerusalem for the Cross—their mother's advocacy causes quite the stir among the disciples. The ten, who are right there all along, “are indignant at the two brothers.” We might expect Jesus to chastise the mother or the two brothers, and rule in favor of the ten. He does not do this.

Instead, he gives all twelve the blueprint for being the greatest. How do these two brothers—or the ten—prove their greatness? What does their path to greatness look like? And for us, when our last breath expires, what will have determined whether or not we were truly great?

**The** things of this world—the things that we desire—the material things and our individual pursuits—are not transported into the life to come. As Job says: “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return.” The kinds of things that can be so captivating in this life have no value, no persistence, in the life to come. The corporate ladder, the wealth accrual, mental acuity, physical fitness—whatever source of material pride captures you—is nothing that you can take with you. Whatever metrics we use in this life to compare ourselves to each other—intelligence, status, wealth, success, ability, agility—get us nowhere in the life to come.

But the heavenly “rat race”—let's call it—operates on fundamentally different principles. If we want to be top rank in the life to come, we had better be a slave to one another here.

It seems the mother of James & John asked a good question, because she got a real answer, a real template.

James & John are going to have to outdo the ten in terms of serving one another; the ten are going to have to outdo James & John in terms of serving one another.

The organizational charts of the corporate world; the powers of government in this world—neither of these translate to greatness. For a CEO to retain his prestige in the life to come, he will need to be a devoted servant to his whole company. For a president to retain his privilege in the life to come, he will need to be a devoted servant to his entire constituents. The same is true here; it will do me no good to simply bear the title of “pastor,” unless I bear also that which necessarily comes with it, the even greater title—Servant.

For the one through whom the world was made is the same one who entered the world through the Virgin Mary—the one who “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” And because of Jesus, Servant is now the greatest of the titles we are eligible to receive.

And that means, no matter your age, no matter your status, no matter your circumstances, no matter your agility, no matter your intelligence, you are—still!—in the running for greatness in the Kingdom of God!

All the while, pride whispers to us, beckoning that we should pay attention, hear its voice, listen to it, follow it. But at what cost? At what price? The cost of our faith? The price of our souls?

Like the Canaanite woman, we will need to lay aside our pride, and listen instead carefully to the words of Jesus. Like the twelve disciples, we will need to *fast* from pride, and instead serve one another. Lest we become like the one disciple who did not—Judas—and lose everything.

Pride assails us, really, at every turn. Pride can convince us that we do not need to sing, or to sing only quietly. Pride can convince us that we do not need to be strengthened in faith, that we do not need to regularly worship, that we do not need one another, that we had better not ask for help from this person or that—and all the rest. Pride tries to tell us that we are too small of a congregation, and that we will only be a real congregation if many more people are here.

Pride tells us many little lies, because pride is the only friend of that tempter—Satan.

Pride tells me lies, too. It tells me that there is something wrong if more and more people aren't in Sunday Worship or Bible Study or Sunday School or the rest. It's an easy lie to believe, isn't it? And yet I won't, because God has promised to be with us — to be *Emmanuel* — when two or three are gathered in his name.

And so, we lay aside our pride and continue to gather before the One who is truly the Servant of all—our Lord Jesus.

For Christ the Lord is worthy of all worship and praise and glory and honor and majesty, now and forever.

**Amen and amen.**