

Sermon for Monday, February 2, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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It only merits
two sentences.
The first time
one of Jesus' closest followers
died for their faith.

“About that time,
writes Luke in the book of Acts,
“About that time
King Herod laid violent hands
upon some who belonged to the church.
He had James, the brother of John,
killed with the sword.”

James was
as far as we know
the first of the twelve apostles
to be killed
for his faith.

James,
the brother of John,
two fishermen
called by Jesus
by the Sea of Galilee
to come follow him.
You know the story.
Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee when he saw two brothers fishing,
and called out to them,
“Come follow me.”
That was Peter and Andrew.
Then he walked a little further
and saw another two brothers,
mending their fishing nets.
And he called out to them too.
That was James and his brother John.

And all four
followed him,
followed him
all over the Holy Land
for the next three years.

And three of the four
became Jesus' closest friends,
Simon Peter and John and James.
They were with him
on the mount of transfiguration
and with him
in the garden of Gethsemane.

And it was James whose mother came to ask Jesus
"Can my sons sit beside you when you come to rule?"
Thinking, of course,
that Jesus was about to manage
some sort of coup
that would push the Romans
and their collaborators
out of the holy city,
out of the holy land,
and that he would become their king,
and need
good leaders by his side.

But of course,
nothing
could be farther
from the truth.
Because Jesus
wasn't planning
on a military coup.
He had no interest
in ruling a country;
his interest
was in ruling hearts.

And he wasn't stupid.

He knew
that the mother's question
was really the sons' one.
And so he said to them,
"Really?
You think you can share my cup?
You think you can rule with me?
Whatever that means?"

"Oh yes," they say, enthusiastically unthinking, "Yes we can."

Although you wonder
how they felt later
as they waited in the garden of Gethsemane
while Jesus prayed,
asking that God take away the cup from him,
and it slowly dawned on them
that the cup they'd so enthusiastically agreed to share
wasn't a celebratory cup of champagne
shared in victory,
but a cup that meant blood
and death.

And yet,
they didn't waver.
They, with Peter, became
the leaders of the church
after
Jesus death and resurrection.
And under their preaching, under their care,
the followers of Jesus exploded in number
spreading from Jerusalem
across the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

Just before
James' death is reported
we hear of a Christian community in Antioch in modern day Turkey
that flourished so much
that it was able to send support back to it's mother church in Jerusalem.

But then, then
Herod - not the same Herod
that was so afraid when Jesus was born,
not the same Herod
that was complicit in his death,
but another member of the dynasty,
Herod began to see this new born church as a threat,
and began to arrest its leaders,
and at the time of the Fest of Unleavened Bread,
the time of Passover,
he arrested James
and had him killed.
Just like Jesus.

Jesus' warning
and James' enthusiastically unthinking words came true.
He did share
in the cup that was Christ's.

As have many followers since,
even this last week,
as you may have heard.

Father Jacques Hamel
was celebrating the Eucharist in his church
when two teenagers came and took him, two nuns, and two parishioners
hostage.
During the siege,
they killed him.

He was simply
following Jesus.

It reminds me of Brother Roger, the founder and prior of the community of Taize,
who just over ten years ago
had joined his community in prayer
when a young woman who was mentally ill
stabbed him.

He was simply

following Jesus.

Sometimes,
not often, but sometimes
following Jesus
means death.

It's not something
we think about often, is it?
The possibility
of dying
for our faith.

And it puts into perspective
the promises we make
at baptism.

Today
Vincent and Isabel will be asked
the same thing, in effect,
that Jesus asked James
by the Sea of Galilee
"Do you promise to follow and obey [Jesus] as your Lord?"
And on their behalf
their parents and godparents will answer,
just as James did,
"I do."

It's a scary thing
Because they don't know
where this will lead their children.
We hope, we hope and pray, that it will not lead them
to death.
And yet that's the hard truth of our faith.
Even now, at this time of such promise in their lives.

In the thanksgiving over the water, we are reminded that
"in it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it
we are reborn by the Holy Spirit."
Death, resurrection, rebirth.
All part

of what being a Christian, a follower of Jesus means.

And for the vast majority of us
it will not mean
dying
a martyr's death.
But it does mean
living a martyr's life.

That is,
each and every one of us
by virtue of our baptism, by virtue of having answered that question
"Do you promise to follow and obey [Jesus] as your Lord?"
we have committed ourselves to following Jesus
whatever the cost.
And we don't know where we will be led.

I suspect that's something
that makes most of us feel
at least a little uncomfortable.
We like to be in charge of our own lives.
We like to make decisions for ourselves.
Putting ourselves into the hands of someone else - even if it's God - is pretty scary.

And yet, it's what we've chosen to do, chosen to do
in baptism,
and when we look the vows upon ourselves in confirmation.
We have put ourselves into the hands of God.
We've said,
we will follow Christ
wherever he leads.

We must be crazy!

And yet, if we look at the lives of those
who have gone before us
we can see that while it's a risk
it's also a gift.

James
was just an ordinary fisherman.
Perhaps he might have made
a once in a lifetime pilgrimage
to Jerusalem;
but he most likely expected to live the rest of his life
within a few miles
of where he was born.
Until Jesus showed up
and led him on a life
that he could never have imagined,
traveling from place to place
all across the Holy Land
preaching and teaching,
and then,
after Jesus' death,
emerging as the leader of the church in Jerusalem.

Brother Roger of Taize
began
by hiding refugees from the Nazis
in the village of Taize
until he was forced out.
After the second world war,
he returned, and reestablished his community, drawing together people from all over the
world - especially young people -
to pray.
And his family
became those with whom he lived and prayed,
and those across the world
who lived and prayed with him.

Father Jacques Hamel
had retired
after serving his parish for many years,
but continued to assist,
saying that he would serve the church
until his last breath -
which is exactly
what he did.

And he was loved
so dearly.

Following Christ
might be costly
but it is also
a blessing.
Because we, we have God
on our side.
God is with us.
And if we trust ourselves to God
God will lead us,
taking us on journeys
we cannot
imagine,
And God will bless us
beyond all imaginings.

This Feast Day of St James
we celebrate the life and service,
and the death
of someone who heard the call of Christ
and answered,
yes.

As we look forward into our own futures
as individuals
and as the church,
Christ will ask us
again and again,
“Do you dare
to follow me?”
Sometimes
it will mean swallowing hard
and taking a risk.
Sometimes
it will mean giving up something
for the greater good.
Sometimes
it will mean taking a chance

that we're not sure we want to take,
or leaving behind
something we really really want to keep hold of
or living for a while
with our hearts in our mouths.
But always it will mean
living out the promise of our baptism
and always it will mean
opening ourselves to God's blessings
and always it will mean
experiencing the new life
that God brings.

Because God is good. All the time.
All the time.
God is good.