

SONS OF THUNDER

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Genesis 5:1-5; Mark 1:14-20

The novelist John Gardner says there are only two memorable plots for all the stories ever told. One is *a stranger came to town*. The other is *someone went on a journey*. But I think a third has to be, *there was a man who had two sons*.

Certainly the archetypal story in scripture is that kind of story. Adam and his wife give life to two boys Cain and Abel. And there's been trouble between brothers ever since.

Abraham's boys, Isaac and Ishmael didn't get along very well, exiled as Ishmael was. He lived as a Bedouin and married an Egyptian and only spoke to his brother Isaac one more time in his life; when they buried Abraham, 175 years old, east of Mamre in the field of Ephron.

Isaac's sons, Jacob and Esau had no particular love of one another either, and they too had to stay away from each other throughout their lives as the only way to get along.

I need not mention the prodigal and the elder brother, the two sons of parable fame to make the point that sibling rivalry was not just an Old Testament problem.

And among the disciples there were two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew, James and John, or maybe there were three. I referred to "twins" among the disciples a few weeks ago and one of you caught me on the technicality of saying that. John's gospel refers to Thomas as the Twin¹, but it's hard to tell in the gospels, who among the disciples is his pair. Only in the book of Acts is Thomas coupled with Phillip by the conjunction "and" but never so in any gospel listing of the disciples and never is there any explicit reference to Phillip as Thomas' twin in just so many words. [But I get sidetracked.]

It's really not Thomas that interests me on this Father's Day in early summer, but rather those two sons of Zebedee, James and John that capture my attention. Their and their father's story is, after all, one of the first stories Mark tells us and it bears the first words that we hear Jesus say to anyone in direct conversation. "Follow me," he says, "and I will make you fishers of others."

And what do they do? They drop their nets immediately, and they follow him. Mark describes the scene this way, "Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men..."

It's a lonely figure he cuts, this father whose two boys, his pride and joy, his heart's delight, the bearers of the family name and his hope for the livelihood of his own retirement, just drop everything and take after a stranger, leaving legacy and expectation, family and personal history behind.

One moment they were mending the nets, weaving the rope into knots, binding together the loose ends, repairing the threads with heavier gauge... the next moment, they were gathering up their tunics and throwing them over their heads, stepping onto shore and turning their back on their dad.

I cannot imagine that a fisherman like Zebedee, a person who had made his living on the sea, with a sailor's mouth and a sailor's experience had nothing to say to those boys as they left him in the boat. This was his economic well being that was walking away from him His future, his enterprise, his partnership and productivity. All his hopes were on these two kids; an heir and a spare. He had even had their names added to the sign outside their market stall, *Zebedee and Sons*, it said.

It's been heartbreaking to listen in recent weeks to interviews with the fishermen in the Gulf region, in Louisiana and Mississippi whose shrimp and scallop and fish supply has been poisoned by the oil gusher underwater there. It has effectively ended several generations of livelihood on the Gulf. People talk about their grandfather having trolled those waters, and their daddy having done the same, and now they are losing what they once had. And they have no idea how to go on, they say, whether to leave the area and start all over, or to wait it out and face a completely changed way of life where they are. Grown men crying over a lost future. That's what we see in the Gulf.

And could it have been much different for Zebedee? He had thrown his life into it. His livelihood and hope. The calluses on his hands were from handling those nets, pitching them over the side and hauling the teeming catch back in. He had worked side by side with his sons, ever since they were tall enough to see over the side of the boat. His leathery skin the result of days in the sun, his bare back tanned from the exposure.

He could remember those boys the first day they went out on the water how unsteady they were. How their mother worried about the pitching of the boat and the warning she had given Zebedee, "If anything happens to those boys..." And here they were walking away from the business. Just like that.

Consider what it's like for a father to lose his sons in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. Somebody comes by and offers them an adventure, and they're gone!

Maybe he had seen it coming. Maybe there was a restlessness between them. Fathers and sons can have that you know. An uneasiness, an edge that's there in the relationship. Too much like their old dad, perhaps.

Maybe they had heard the disappointment in his voice those times that he had groaned about getting up so early, and all these years working on the same old boat and what did he have to show for it. Maybe they sensed between their dad and mother, a disappointment in life that had settled in. The thought that perhaps if things had been a little different, he might made out better in life, a different job, something more successful, something more lucrative. He could have been a contender.

Maybe they had had those talks. Maybe they had thought about it sometimes in their own hearts. Did they really want to be like him? Did they really want the life he had? Could they be happy on the sea if their father had not been happy there?

It's one thing to choose a life's work. It's another to have it chosen for you, and assumed that this is what you will be and this is what you will do.

It's quite another thing altogether to be chosen and to choose; for an opportunity to arise, a moment to decide and you take it, not knowing what it will be or what it will bring. And of course, that's what it was with Jesus that day. Something about him and the invitation to do something more important than you have ever done before, to follow someone better than you have ever followed before.

Maybe you would drop everything that you were doing up to that point in life for someone like that. Maybe.

David Sheff writes a poignant and terrifying true book about his son Nic and Nic's addiction to crystal meth; a book entitled **Beautiful Boy**. In one particularly touching scene he describes the longing and comfort that a father feels for his three children Nic who is nineteen, Jasper who is five, and Daisy who is about two.

He writes:

Back home after an early dinner and... pie, Nic and Jasper play in the grass. Like a lion cub, Jasper climbs onto Nic's head, and they roll around on a big red ball. Karen is holding Daisy, who is looking around with her wide eyes. Brutus, lumbering over like a sleeping brown bear, sprawls on the grass near the kids. With Jasper hanging onto his neck, Nic rolls over and, holding the dog by the jowls and staring into his eyes, sings, "Give me a kiss to build a dream on." He plants a big kiss on Brutus' nose. Brutus yawns, Nic playfully tosses Jasper into the air, and Daisy drifts into a soft sleep.

I look at the three of them and recall a bewildering emotion that I recognized for the first time back when Nic was born. Along with the joy of parenthood, with every child comes a piercing vulnerability. It is at once sublime and terrifying.

[Sheff goes on] In the newspaper a few days ago, I read about a school bus explosion in Israel and an update on some of the families of the children killed ... in the Oklahoma City bombing; stray bullets hitting children in a refugee camp in Bosnia; and a story from China, where a convicted armed robber, on his way to the gallows, screamed out to his brother, "Take care of my son." I felt a new quality of anguish. Maybe parents feel for every child. Maybe we feel more than we ever knew possible. As I look at my three children, in the diffused gold light that shines unsteadily through the poplar leaves, I feel overfull with the knowledge that for this moment they are safe and happy, which is ultimately all we parents want. If only it could be like this always – the children nearby, getting along, happy, and safe.²

I suppose that afternoon has been repeated so many times in so many homes and in so many hearts. Parents looking at their children playing together in the park, their

small son hugging a friend in the lobby of the nursery school at morning's start, emerging from the womb that day when your knees were shaking underneath you and you thought that for a moment the veil to heaven and eternity had been pulled back. Didn't Zebedee have had the same pride in his sons as any father? The same connection. The same tension?

The name Zebedee, is a Greek formation of the Hebrew name Zebediah or Zabdi, Gift of God. And so I can only assume that there was a goodness about this man, a kindness of heart, a gentleness for all of his life on the sea and among the working men of the waters. There must have been a strength to him too, because his sons were known according the scriptures as the Sons of Thunder. And whether it was Zebedee's thunder that they shared or only their own, it makes me wonder all the more about the father who was left in the boat that day that Jesus came by and invited his sons to follow him.

In the end, I am left wondering about old Zebedee and what it was like to see the boys leave that day, leave home and leave him standing, nets in hand, boat on the water, hired hands looking at Zebedee's face to see what he would do. I would have given anything to have their view, to see his face.

There comes a day when every father (and mother for that matter) is left there, in the boat, net in hand, sons or daughters headed away. It is a moment full of pathos and of power, and of powerlessness too, as life does what life does to all of us, which is to lead us on to whatever lies ahead. It is part of what we do in baptism, of course, recognize that this is God's child even more than he or she is our own, and God has plans that are more and different than any of ours.

I'm not sure Zebedee would have recognized God working out plans in his sons' lives was what was happening that day at the shoreline, but maybe one day he did. Maybe he did in time.

There is an oft told tale associated with Will Willimon now Methodist Bishop of North Alabama, that dates back a few years to the time when he was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University.

Willimon tells of a telephone call that he received one day from an irate father of a graduating senior.

"I hold you personally responsible for this," the caller began. "Me?" Willimon asked.

It turns out the father was upset because his graduate school bound daughter had just informed him that she was going to "throw it all away" and go do mission work with the Presbyterians in Haiti. "Isn't that absurd!" shouted the father. "A BS degree in mechanical engineering from Duke and she's going to dig ditches in Haiti."

Not quite sure how to respond, Willimon tried humor. "Well, I doubt that she's received much training in the Engineering Department here for that kind of work, but she's a fast learner and she'll probably get the hang of ditch-digging in a few months."

“Look,” said the father, “this is no laughing matter. You should never have encouraged her to do this. I hold you personally responsible.”

Realizing he was getting nowhere, Willimon finally said to the father, “Look you’re the ones who had her baptized, you read Bible stories to her, you taught her bedtime prayers, you took her to Sunday School, you let her go with the Presbyterian Youth Fellowship on trips. Willimon said, “You’re the one that introduced her to Jesus, not me.”

“That may be true,” the father said, “But all we ever wanted her to do was to be a Presbyterian.”

I’m thinking about Zebedee that day by the Sea of Galilee, and how things changed so quickly. That’s the way it is with God. That’s the way it is with life. That’s the way it is for those who are baptized, those who are called according to God’s word, who hear the voice that knows their name and bids them follow.

And I ask you, who better to follow? Who better?

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¹ John 11:16

² David Sheff, **Beautiful Boy**. Boston: Mariner Books, 2008. 64-65.