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Isaiah 53:4-12; psalm 91; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

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“Can you drink the cup?” This is Jesus’ response to the sons of Zebedee, disciples who are eager to reserve the places of honor at his left and his right hand. And it is one of those questions of Jesus that echo over the centuries, a question that is at once a challenge and an invitation.

On one level, we hear this as a rebuke to James and John. Their request is offensive, and clueless too, when you remember where it comes in the story. Let’s rewind the story to the part that comes right before what you heard today.

“They were on the road”—the twelve and unnamed others who are following Jesus—“going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them...[Jesus] took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, ‘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; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.’”

What we hear today is their response to this disturbing news. Mark goes on, “James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’

That’s right—they have just heard Jesus telling them what will happen to him, for the third time, and what do they do? Push to the front to get his attention, and then try to reserve the best seats in glory.

Now at this point it wouldn’t be too surprising if Jesus got a little impatient with them, as he sometimes did do. But his answer seems very gentle.

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

In the scriptures they all knew, the cup was the cup of God’s judgment, the cup of wrath and trembling.. Maybe they thought of psalm 75: “For in the

hand of the Lord there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed; he will pour a draught from it and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs.” [Psalm 75:8] Or Jeremiah, where God tells the prophet, “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 go out of their minds...and if they refuse to accept the cup from your hand to drink then you shall say to them: Thus says the Lord of hosts, drink!” [Jeremiah 25:15-16, 28]. Or Isaiah: “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]

Here in Mark, the cup is not judgment or wrath, but certainly the cup holds suffering—the rejection, humiliation, and death that Jesus has just told them lies ahead. To share in his ministry is to drink that cup with him. So Jesus gives them a chance to reconsider: “Can you drink the cup?”

In other words, think about it. Maybe it’s time for you to go home, back to your father’s fishing business.

But it seems like they don’t even wait a beat. “We are able,” they declare.

Not quite.

In Gethsemane, where Jesus prays all night in agony as his hour comes, they cannot even stay awake with him. Drinking this cup is too much for them. It is nearly too much for Jesus himself. He grieves and agonizes as his hour comes; he prays three times that the cup might be taken from him.

At the crucifixion, James and John are not in the crowd. It’s not the sons of Zebedee on Jesus’ left and right, but instead, two bandits.

Can you drink the cup? It is an invitation into a life of discipleship, a life that will cost everything. James and John don’t understand what that means, not yet, they don’t. They don’t understand what it will cost to follow Jesus. But then again, maybe none of us does, and thank God for it.

In the end, both James and John *will* share in Jesus’ suffering—which, in Mark’s gospel, *is* his glory. The book of Acts tells us that James was the

first Apostle to suffer martyrdom, beheaded by Herod Agrippa I. We don't know the ultimate fate of John, but Acts tells us that he was imprisoned with Peter and appeared before the Sanhedrin.

James and John don't understand what they're getting into, but they do know one thing. To be on the way with Jesus is the way of life. They will claim the power of love, and will learn how much that costs.

The cup Jesus offers to his disciples, then and now, is the cup of life, filled to the brim with suffering and joy. Can you drink that cup? Can you taste all the joys and sorrows of the life you have been given? Can you drink it to the dregs?

Can you drink the cup? In his book by that name, Henri Nouwen reflects on what it means to say yes to that invitation—to hold, to lift, and to drink the cup.

To hold the cup is to accept the life that we have been given—your one and only life on this earth. Holding the cup, we embrace what is and what will be—all the grief and blessing life will bring. As Nouwen writes, “This is my life, the life that is given to me, and it is this life that I have to live, as well as I can.”¹

Lifting the cup, we share our lives with others, as we raise our glasses to toast a newly-wed couple or a co-worker who is retiring; as we share a cup of coffee with a friend; as we gather around Sunday dinner, say grace, and lift our glasses in celebration. Lifting the cup, we say we belong to one another; we are ready to share our joy and sorrow.

Drinking the cup, we take the risks of love. We drink deep, in trust that God will give us what we need to bear the sorrow and grief that comes to all of us, sooner or later. We drink deep, in trust that another day the cup will brim with the joy of new life. We drink in gratitude for all we have been given, and in hope as we remember all that God has promised.

¹ Henry Nouwen, *Can You Drink the Cup?* (1996), 28.

Holding, lifting, and drinking the cup—we come here to do that together. In our gathering, Jesus shows up and bread and wine are made holy. So come and receive this cup of blessing, the blood of Christ poured out for you.