

Mary, mother of James & John

I hope you will not judge me too harshly.

It is true we asked Jesus for special favour, my sons and I.

Every good mother wants the best for her children, right?

But that is not the beginning and end of what happened.

I simply ask that you hear me out. Hear my story before you make your judgments. As Jesus said, "Let whoever is without sin throw the first stone." It is difficult to know where to start. From the time James and John were babies, I assumed they would follow in their father's footsteps -- or perhaps I should say: in their father's sails.

My husband, Zebedee, was a *very* successful fisherman.

Everyone knew Zebedee. Neighbors didn't refer to my sons as James and John, they called them the *sons of Zebedee*.

And they did not call me by my given name, Mary Solome.

They called me the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Zebedee just smiled at his fame.

Knowing how and where to fish is important, but an eye for detail, nets in good repair, a head for business, knowing how to plan and how to save, these are the skills that make an ordinary fisherman into a celebrated one.

James and John learned well from their father.

They were becoming great fishermen, like Zebedee, but then one day they dropped everything and started following Jesus.

That day I had made bread and was savoring a moment of peace before Zebedee and my "sons of thunder" arrived home. Their energy was *life* to me. I heard the door creak open, and turned to greet my boys.

There was Zebedee, gazing at me and beyond me at the same time. He looked older than he did that morning. Old, and so, so tired. I look around him, to catch a glimpse of my sons, but they were not there.

Like most mothers, I had dreams for my children. Dreams that did not include a life of uncertain income or personal peril. I wanted health and even wealth

for my boys - and hoped they would grow up to be hard-working and respected like their father.

We knew Jesus fairly well. He was family.¹ And, while we knew he was an engaging fellow, when the boys left their nets and started following him, Zebedee and I could not make sense of it. Why would they give up a bright future for a doubtful one?

Zebedee never was to fully know in this life...

In time, wanting to figure out what sort of power he might have over them, I started following Jesus too – and something unexpected happened.

I did what my sons had done! I dropped everything, and became a part of this community of love and justice.

I stepped out of the world's expectations and stepped into God's promises.

My life was truly full in a wholly new way.

Jesus told a parable about a woman who carried a large jar of grain to her home². She didn't realize that it was broken and all the while she was walking with that grain, that life-giving source of nourishment was spilling out

behind her. When she arrived home, the jar was empty.

I tell you... I was that woman. The way I was living my life there was very little left of me at the end of each day.

My soul was like a pile of Ezekiel's dry bones. Oh, I carefully kept the law of Moses --but there was no love in it.

In the community of Jesus, I learned to pray.

I learned to be honest to God and to myself. I learned that loving God and loving neighbor are the most important things in the world.

That day, Jesus held nothing back. He stood before us all, before his family of followers and he said, "Listen, we are heading for Jerusalem now, where the chief priests and the Scribes will condemn me. They are going to crucify me ...but, be assured, that will not be the end of it."

Some of the disciples resisted this. They could not imagine anything other than complete victory against the Roman oppressors. But I could see what a threat Jesus was to those in power among our own people.

¹ Mary, mother of James and John, may have been a cousin of Mary, mother of Jesus.

² The Gospel according to Thomas, saying 97: Jesus said, "The [Father's] kingdom is like a woman who was carrying a [jar] full of meal. While she was walking along [a] distant road, the handle of the jar

broke and the meal spilled behind her [along] the road. She didn't know it; she hadn't noticed a problem. When she reached her house, she put the jar down and discovered that it was empty." From the "Scholars' Translation" by Stephen Patterson and Marvin Meyer.

The scribes and the Pharisees saw Jesus as a troublemaker, a threat to everything they believed.

Where they were still teaching “an eye for an eye”, Jesus was teaching, “if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.”

And where they were still teaching, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,” Jesus was teaching, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Why, he was turning everything inside out.

He was getting to the heart of what God wants of us.

But those Scribes and Pharisees, wed to the letter of the law as they were, became infuriated by his teaching.

All they could see was him undermining their authority - their “Jerusalem First” mentality.

I knew he was not long for this world.

He could have slipped away in the dark of night and hidden himself in a busy place like Egypt.

He could have lived a long life -- but, in order to do that, he would have to

traded his brilliant soul for that leaky jar of grain.

The same was true for us, for James and John and for me.

I knew that, in heading for Jerusalem with Jesus - we were putting our own lives at risk.

Have you ever tried to say something only to have the words come out all wrong? Have you ever tried to do something good only to have it go sideways?

I meant my words to be supportive of Jesus.

With all my love and respect, I knelt before him, wording our devotion in the form of a favour.

“What would you like?” he asked - so kind to this woman old enough to be his mother.

I replied, “Teacher, grant that my sons, James and John, may be seated next to you in your kingdom, one on your right and one on your left.”

--Knowing that, to be seated at Jesus’ side was to choose the path of self-sacrifice.

Jesus seemed to understand what I meant, I should say, what we meant, for we went to him together.³ He did not chide us.

³ In the Gospel according to Mark, James and John approach Jesus with no mention of their mother. In the Gospel according to Matthew, mother and sons

go together to Jesus. In the opinion of the author, the three went together but Mark felt no need to mention Mary simply because she was a woman and,

He simply said, "You don't know what you are asking."

And it was true. We did not know the depth of fear and hatred the establishment would bring to bear.

He asked us, "Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" I was never so proud of James and John as when they said to him, "Yes, Lord, we are able."

Are ye able said the master, to be crucified with me?

Yea the sturdy dreamers answered to the death we follow thee. Lord, we are able. Our spirits are thine.

Remold them, make us like thee divine.

Thy guiding radiance above us shall be

a beacon to God, to love and loyalty. (Earl Marlat)

The Romans have a coin with a picture of an ox on it.⁴

The ox is facing two different things – a plough and an altar. The inscription on the coin reads, "Ready for either."

The ox must be ready for grueling hours of labour or for the great

therefore, less noteworthy. Curiously, Matthew's version of what happened is not included in the common lectionary.

⁴ Coin as described by William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Volume 2, page 255.

sacrifice of his life. In that moment, James, John, and I were *ready for either*.

I think Jesus knew that we were expressing our invincible faith⁵ in him...and we were offering to stay by his side through the excruciating days we knew lay ahead.

He told us some decisions belonged to God, and God alone.

Now, some of the others overheard our private conversation and were more than a little disturbed.

Everybody wanted to be close to Jesus and, truth be told, Jesus loved every one of them.

As a mother, I know what this is like.

I know what it means to love each child uniquely, and yet, to love each one with my whole being.

And so Jesus, the great and patient teacher, who had just reminded us that the last shall be first and the first shall be last, used this moment to instruct us again about real power.

"You know," he said, "the rulers of the Gentiles lord power over them, and their great ones are tyrants.

⁵ Invincible faith is the expression used by William Barclay to describe what is happening in this passage. Barclay: *The Gospel of Matthew*, Volume 2, page 253.

It will not be so among you; whoever wishes to be great among you must be servant,

and whoever wishes to be first among you must serve.

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve..."

The days unfolded too quickly: we entered Jerusalem in glory, celebrated the Passover, and then, he was arrested and tortured and, to our horror, hung on that cross --.

James and John fled for their lives near the end, but I stayed with him. There was little I could do...yet I could be there for him and with him, and with his dear mother and beloved friends.

I know... I was not a perfect mother, nor a perfect disciple. And sometimes I have put earthly ambition above the God of heaven and earth. Yet I was given a gift. I was able to stay. I stayed. I bore witness. I offered comfort. I served as I could.

And in your imperfect lives, I hope you will find the courage to do the same. To be a servant of God, wherever you are.

For God has wonderment in store for us all!

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