

James and John are angry. They are suggesting the sort of retribution that we usually associate with end-of-the-world prophets and certain flavours of old testament payback for those who dare to show indifference (or insolence) towards God. “Do you want us to call down fire from heaven...?” What a tempting alternative.

Luke’s gospel suggests something like a travelling road show. “Messengers” go ahead to “make ready for him...” - think advance crew before the concert, or in this case, revival meeting. It does not go well.

The good people of the village can see that Jesus mind is otherwise occupied (his face is set towards Jerusalem). It’s no fun if the keynote speaker doesn’t seem fully invested in the venue, so the organizing committee is met with “Thanks, but no thanks.” That’s show biz.

But James and John are full of the zeal of the newly converted. Bear in mind, they have (according to Luke) recently completed a very successful tour of the countryside - even drawing the curiosity of Herod (Luke 9:1-9). They have tasted success, and they like it. This is, after all, what they signed up for. But here: resistance; reluctance; apathy. How is it possible? This is GOOD NEWS, after all - they are on God’s side - anyone should know that. The sSons of Thunder are...what, offended? Dumbfounded? Enraged...?

There’s an old saying that says “if at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.” Apparently this saying was not part of the language of the day. For James and John (the sons of thunder), the attitude seems to be “If at first WE don’t succeed, THEY don’t deserve a second chance.

Fire. From. Heaven. Wow...

So - the good news is that Jesus rebukes them. Way to go Jesus.

But the text doesn't dwell on whether or not it is wrong to react so violently to such a minor snub. And just when you think that we are back with Jesus, friend of the oppressed and master of all mercy, there are three brief episodes that ought to leave you feeling...conflicted.

- 1) "I'll follow you wherever you go!" - Jesus response is best summed up like this: that's great, but I have nowhere to go. The first applicant for the job of disciple seems sure that there is a fixed destination for this journey of discipleship. Jesus sets him straight - and by the way does not make a compelling case for the whole "follow me" program that he has announced.
- 2) "I'll follow, but first let me bury my father." Jesus answer: Let the dead bury the dead. WHAT? Are you angry yet? If not, imagine that you are the one asking for a couple of days of compassionate leave to do what is necessary and honourable...and Jesus says NO.
- 3) "I'll follow you, but first let me say goodbye to those I'm leaving behind..." Jesus: "yeah, that's not going to work." - except he's not exactly understanding - or compassionate - or encouraging to those who want to take up the cause on their own terms.

What do you make of that?

There is no easy way to turn these encounters into GOOD NEWS. Sure, Jesus won't allow his disciples to lay waste to the opposition - I suppose that is a bright spot, and we would do well to follow up on that notion. Quick lesson: there's no honour (for God or God's people) in reacting violently to contrary opinions. So the Samaritan village wouldn't see Jesus. Move along - there's more work to be done. (and doesn't a Samaritan become the hero in one of Jesus most memorable parables?).

But what of those who want to follow? What are the demands of discipleship? Can we serve God on our terms, or must we be prepared to abandon our familiar social comforts to walk the trail that Jesus blazes?

The church of the early to mid twentieth Century was the church 'in charge'. The institution had established a place for itself in much of western Europe and North America. Religious leaders commanded respect. Governments listened. The church 'made a place for Jesus to lay his head'. We managed the living and dying of those in our care. We embraced the language of 'family values'. The church was a powerful force. But that power was temporary.

The ones who call down fire from heaven these days are those who are trying to revive the "powerful church." They want a return to the days of influence and importance that they imagine are their right (as those who follow Jesus) They make the same mistake as those who once imagined that Jesus came to usurp Roman authority and take up an earthly throne. But when Jesus calls us to follow, he invites us into a different power structure. Jesus has 'no place to lay his head' There is no standing still; no waiting for the world to beat a path to our door. We are messengers of the gospel. It is in us and goes with us.

Our anger on God's behalf is not necessary - neither are we invited to be comfortably established. Human emotions, human relationships, all these must be reimagined when we choose to follow Jesus. Reimagined, not cast aside. Jesus does not call us to an unfeeling, unengaged life - but our feelings, and our engagement will be expressed in uncomfortable ways. We are invited to make choices that will take us beyond the comfortable boundaries of family responsibilities. Every step along the road with Jesus will take us further from the familiar...and it is a delightful thing to discover God in the unfamiliar.

Even now, there are those who sympathize with the ‘Sons of Thunder’; folks of ‘faith’ who do not recognize faithfulness unless it follows familiar patterns. They long to be powerful, comfortable and in control, yet none of these things are part of God’s covenant promise. The one who raised Jesus from the dead does not operate according to our notions of power, control or comfort. The Holy Spirit is as often as not a wild, unpredictable wind that blows new life into stale ideas, and carries reluctant messengers beyond their comfort zones. That’s how the kingdom comes.