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Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

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Isaiah 53:4-9; Ps. 91:9-16; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

Several years ago, we took Tae to Disney's California Adventure and, after a long, hot day of rides and walking for what seemed like miles, we were all happy to sit in an air-conditioned theater and watch the performance of *Disney's Aladdin—A Musical Spectacular*. Frankly, I was just looking for a cool place to rest my feet, but it ended up being way more amazing than I expected it to be. There was an actual magic carpet that took Princess Jasmine and Aladdin way above the theater stage where they sang *A Whole New World*. I'm sure the Broadway play, like the movie version, also has a magic carpet that gets the characters way up high, where, as the song says, "[T]here's no one to tell us no, or where to go."

It was this scene of Jasmine and Aladdin way high up on a magic carpet that popped into my head this week as I considered what James and John were asking of Jesus in the gospel today: grant us to sit, Jesus, one at your right hand, and one at your left, in your glory. They pictured Jesus high above the suffering of the world where, as perhaps they also thought, "no one can tell us no, or where to go."

But we have to back up a little bit to understand why James and John asked Jesus what they did. In the lectionary gospel reading today we don't hear what happens just before James and John ask to sit with Jesus at his right hand and at his left in his glory. This is what the verses just beforehand say:

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, ³³ 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; ³⁴ they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."

Clearly James and John are freaked out about this. They don't want to experience the suffering of Jesus, they just want to live with Christ in glory. They believed that if they asked to sit at Christ's right and left hand, they would be free from such suffering.

What James and John are looking for is a magic carpet to lift them above suffering, above the difficulty of the world, above the hard work of discipleship, to a whole new world where no one will tell them no, or where to go. They don't want to deal with the crap, they just want to experience the glory.

And thus, Jesus says to them, "You have no idea what you're asking."

I wonder if sometimes our own prayers to God mirror the desires of James and John. Understandably we all pray to be free from suffering. But I wonder if we're essentially praying for a magic carpet to take us to a whole new world, above suffering, above the difficulty of the world, above the hard work of discipleship. I wonder if we too don't want to deal with the crap, we just want to experience the glory. And so our prayers treat God like a genie who grants us wishes to magically get above the situations and the suffering we're in, instead of praying to God as one who enters our situations and our suffering with us in order to get us through.

Because here's the thing about suffering: just like the grass and the river and the mud in the bear hunt, we can't go over it, we can't go under it, we can't go around it, we have to go through it in order to get to the other side. Suffering, even if it's completely undeserved, happens to all of us. Remember, the ones who ultimately sat at Jesus right hand and left hand were the criminals who were crucified beside him. And when suffering happens, we have a choice: we can ask God to magically get us above it, or we can ask God to enter into it with us to accompany us to the other side, like the criminal crucified next to Jesus who asked him, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

It was actually a Buddhist nun, Pema Chodron, who taught me the most about this. In her book called *When Things Fall Apart*, Chodron says that there is only one approach to suffering that has lasting benefit. It involves leaning into the suffering and into painful situations with curiosity and groundedness. Our natural human inclination is to move away from

suffering—to get above it like a magic carpet—but it’s actually by moving into the suffering, by moving toward painful situations that we will be able to move *through* them.

Did you notice what Jesus said to James and John after he told them they did not know what they were asking? “The cup that I drink you will drink,” Jesus tells them, “and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized.” Basically, Jesus says, we will suffer together. Together. When you suffer I will suffer with you, and when I am raised, you too shall be raised. You can’t ask to get above the suffering, you can’t just skip the suffering to get to the glory, but you can trust that I will enter the suffering with you. I will go with you into suffering and death, because I came not to be served, but to serve, and to give my life a ransom for many.

When you are suffering, when you are facing painful situations, don’t pray that God gets you out of suffering—because there’s no way above or under or around suffering—but pray instead that you can sense Jesus move with you in the midst of the suffering. Pray that you can sense Jesus raising you (*On Eagles Wings*) not above the suffering, but through it, holding you in the palm of his hand as he joins you in your suffering and accompanies you to the other side.

James and John may not have known what they were asking, but they did experience glory, because Jesus promised to bless them abundantly with his presence in their suffering. In your baptism Jesus promised you the same. So trust that you will get through suffering because you have a companion who will go with you, the one who gave his life as a ransom for you.

Amen.