

Walking with James

Message for August 30, 2009

Have you ever noticed how a successful child in high school pretty much ruins it for the others coming later on? I mean, a student who is good at academics, involved in extra-curricular activities and who gets along with all his or her teachers really sets up a younger brother or sister for some challenging times down the road.

I can speak from my own experience (or, rather, I can speak from my brother's experience!). It won't come as a surprise to you that I was one of those kids in high school who loved every minute of it – so much to do, so many committees that needed someone like me! Chorus, newspaper, theater, sports, student government – I almost never went home during the four years I spent at Coronado High in Scottsdale, and I was a decent student who loved my teachers and had personal relationships with lots of them. CHS was MY school from 1968 through 1972, and when I left, I cried real hard at graduation...I didn't want to go. You can bet that the transition to college life was a big shift for me and it took me a while to get used to being a small fish in a huge ocean at ASU Main the following year.

But that adjustment was nothing compared to what my little brother went through. Dallas is a year younger than me, so as he worked his way through high school, he heard things like, "Oh, you're Janie Jones' brother? She sure is a great student – are you like her?" Or, "I didn't know Janie Jones had a brother! What do YOU do?" And God forbid if he didn't live up to my academic performance – he'd hear something like, "Wow, are you sure you're Janie Jones' brother? She would never forget an assignment."

Poor Dal – like many boys his age, he wasn't really a motivated student, and he didn't blossom himself until many years later when he left school and ventured out into the world of electronics where he found his own strengths. Today, he runs the whole communication department for the city of Wichita, and he just retired from a 30 year tour in the Air National Guard – he did all right on his own. But for a while, he lived under my shadow, and I'm pretty sure there were times when he wished he was anyone else's brother but mine. I didn't mean to blaze such a wide trail for him to follow...

These sibling memories came into my mind because our focus scripture for today and for the next several weeks will be on James, who has been recognized by most authorities as a brother of Jesus – and specifically, the brother who was given the awesome responsibility of building the new church. I think it is worth the time to take this Sunday to do a little background work about him and his life, so that as we hear his words in the coming weeks, we will better understand the context in which he offered them. So today, some history...

First of all, there are some scholars, specifically of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic branch of Christianity, who don't believe James was Jesus' brother at all. If the Virgin Mary was a virgin her whole life (as they profess), then she wouldn't have had any more children, so they contend that James is actually a cousin of Jesus. Please know that this is not the standard belief – most scholars have dug much deeper into the whole argument, and have found accounts from writers who were contemporaries of the time, and they confidently speak of "James the Just (or James the Righteous), the brother of Jesus." There are accounts in the Acts of the Apostles of our Bible which make the same reference, and, in some of the writings that didn't make the cut into the final version of the Bible (such as the Gospel of Thomas, and words written by people like Josephus and Eusebius of Caesarea), James is described or listed as the brother of Jesus. So let's just say that we go along with this last group of scholars and accept that James has true birthright as sibling to the Risen Christ.

The brother of Jesus! Can you imagine what that must have been like? When I first began reading about James, I wondered about the relationship between the two. I wonder if they took long walks into the desert together to talk – if Jesus shared his doubts and worries with James – if they talked about the future of a new faith and James' part in it – if they made plans for the protection and old age of their mother.

There is so little to help us understand the relationship they may have had – so we can only guess if there were issues or resentment as James lived in the light of his amazing brother. There are some who think that James and the other three brothers of Jesus who are mentioned in the Bible may have not really taken Jesus' ministry seriously or accepted it until after they came across an empty tomb.

Knowing how brothers can be, would you believe your brother if he told you he was the Son of God? And we have heard in several places in the Gospels that Jesus' ministry wasn't truly accepted in his hometown where his relatives might live – and he seemed to have more success elsewhere. But most scholars believe that in fact, James and Jesus were probably pretty close, and James actively supported the work his brother did, because he was part of the traveling band of disciples – he was there through all of it. Certain incidents point to the status James had in the early church: Jesus visited James after the Resurrection...one of only three personal visits. After surviving prison and as he fled Jerusalem, Peter made a point of getting word to James that he'd survived the whole thing, but had to leave. In the end, Jesus passed the baton to James the day of the Last Supper. There's even some consideration by biblical scholars that James was the intended recipient of Jesus' proclamation in Matthew 16:18 that says, "I tell you, you are James (not Peter) and on this rock I will build my church." Some think those head-strong scribes tweaked this to make Peter the recipient of this blessing, for Peter's name is in this passage today!

We'll never know the truth, but if we consider some of the ancient testimonies, we can learn much about how the early church functioned after Jesus' Resurrection – and for 30 years, James was the recognized and respected administrator of the whole thing until he was martyred and stoned to death by Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. With the help of these ancient writings, we can piece a few bits of information together to give us some idea as to what kind of man James was.

Here's one example. Around the year 130 C. E., a writer named Hegesippus wrote in the fifth book of his *Commentaries* this description:

After the apostles, James, the brother of the Lord, surnamed the Just, was made head of the Church of Jerusalem. Many indeed are called James. This one was holy from his mother's womb. He drank neither wine nor strong drink, ate no flesh, never shaved or anointed himself with ointment or bathed. He alone had the privilege of entering the Holy of Holies, since indeed, he did not use woollen vestments but linen, and went alone into the temple and prayed in behalf of the people, insomuch that his knees were reputed to have acquired the hardness of camel's knees.

Now that's some serious devotion! James the Just was pious, faithful to the traditions, and strong in his beliefs. He lived a good Jew's life – he still believed in the old practices and while he also accepted the Risen Christ, he followed many of the customs of the day. It was said that James was more of a homebody, and he didn't feel the need to travel as much as his contemporary Paul did. James wasn't into converting Gentiles – he was more interested in bringing other Jews (who would be known as the new Jewish sect, the Nazarenes) into the fold. He didn't correspond with the converts outside Jerusalem much, and even though he was still considered the “Bishop” of the new church, (and as we'll see soon when we hear more from the Book of James that he was totally committed to God's way) it seems his style of leading was pretty sedate. Steady and true, James did good work for God but he didn't dazzle like Paul.

In contrast to James, Paul was a dynamic world traveler who actively sought out anyone who would even consider this new religion based on a Risen Christ and God's love and forgiveness. A convert himself, he won them over to his faith – he wrote them long letters of advice and support, and visited them on a regular basis to check on their progress and encourage them in person and by messenger. Paul, John, James and Peter were considered by many to be the Pillars of the new church; and in spite of their differences, James was the acknowledged and appointed leader for the early times.

It would seem that they worked well together, since there was much to do and there were specific roles they fulfilled, but when it came down to including Paul's converts as part of the new church, there was a time early on when it looked like things might fall apart. James and his Nazarenes all followed the traditional ways, but Paul was bringing to the mix men who weren't Jews and didn't want to become Jews; they especially didn't feel like going through the process of being circumcised in order to be accepted in the new church! There was discussion all around, and in the end, James decided that the new converts didn't have to be circumcised, but they that they should follow other traditional ways of Moses (such as prayer practices, cleanliness procedures and eating habits). The fact that James decided seems to be significant – his decision could have been challenged by the others, but they seemed to accept his authority in this matter, implying that as the brother of Jesus, and the chosen one, he was supposed to make the call.

But, the popularity of the new church and the growing number of converts could be traced to Paul, (and the new church was trying to separate itself from its Jewish connections). As years went by and these accounts were recorded, the importance of the role James played at the time was diminished to what we have today: his name shows up here and there, and he has a book in the Bible. Some brazen scribes made a few alterations and interpretations to help the early church along – and in our Bible of today Paul’s work is recognized as the cornerstone to the success of the early church. Instead of living in the shadow of his famous brother Jesus, it almost feels like James lived in the shadow of his Brother in Christ, Paul.

James served his God, but in the end, like his brother, he paid a dear price – he gave his life for his faith. I’m discovering as I study the Bible and different sources, that there are as many viewpoints and interpretations about how things happened as there are places to look for answers. I’m very much a novice in this area, but I get a little frustrated because there are so many choices when I read about these things – no wonder there are hundreds of types of beliefs in the world!

Here’s one example: James angered the leaders of the Temple, and so he was stoned to death. This is a horrible statement to make, and should be fairly straightforward to report, but each ancient author describes this event with additional or alternative details. Josephus simply states that James was stoned by a crowd of angry Jews. Hegesippus says this, and added a final blow to the head by something called a “fullers club,” which is a stick used to pound dye into fabric.

But according to Eusebius, written in Fragments from the Acts of the Church; Concerning the Martyrdom of James, the Brother of the Lord, from Book 5 the scribes and Pharisees came to James, hoping he’d help them speak against Jesus, the Christ and the new church. They believed the Nazarenes had gone astray, and since it was Passover and many Jews were in town, they wanted James to tell everyone to return to their Jewish roots and turn away from the new church. You already know how this came down – James the Just stayed true to his brother’s memory and to the new church.

“To the scribes' and Pharisees' dismay, James boldly testified that Christ ‘Himself sitteth in heaven, at the right hand of the Great Power, and shall come on the clouds of heaven.’ ”

As you can expect, this didn't sit well with the scribes and Pharisees and so they

“...threw down the just man... [and] began to stone him: for he was not killed by the fall; but he turned, and kneeled down, and said: "I beseech Thee, Lord God our Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.

And, while they were thus stoning him to death, one of the priests, the sons of Rechab, the son of Rechabim, to whom testimony is borne by Jeremiah the prophet, began to cry aloud, saying: "Cease, what do ye? The just man is praying for us." But one among them, one of the fullers, took the staff with which he was accustomed to wring out the garments he dyed, and hurled it at the head of the just man.

And so he suffered martyrdom; and they buried him on the spot, and the pillar erected to his memory still remains, close by the temple. This man was a true witness to both Jews and Greeks that Jesus is the Christ.”

No matter which translation or interpretation we accept, the fact remains that James lived and died true to his God – he even may have asked for forgiveness of his murderers, as Jesus did – and someone in the crowd recognized that this death may have not been such a great idea. It appears that the stoning of James was politically motivated, and not long afterward, Jerusalem fell again to Rome, making the people (including scribes and Pharisees) captives once more. The new church lost ground...and I bet the early Christians had to go underground again.

It's quite a story, isn't it? I find poetry in the telling of James' life, and in his writing I expect we'll find poetry in words spoken from the heart of a devoted believer – words that can speak to us, too. If you have time, read the Book of James this week in preparation for our study – it's a good read. Beginning next week, we'll look at the Book of James (including the passage for today) and consider the wisdom of Jesus' brother who we now know, cast a large shadow of his own.

Until then, God's Peace to us all – and Thanks be to God for Stories and Words to guide our lives.

Amen.