

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Zebedee Do-Dah!”**

**Psalm 62:5 – 12
Mark 1:14 – 20**

June 28, 2015

At the very end of the great movie, *The Godfather, Part II* (which I’ve seen, like, 8,437 times), there’s a flashback scene, in which Michael Corleone announces to his brothers that he’s dropped out of school so he can fight in World War II. They’d been arguing around the dinner table about whether or not they had a responsibility to go off and fight for their country; and the consensus was that only a sap would do something like that... because it’s stupid to put your life on the line for anyone other than your family.

Michael then said, *“That’s not the way I feel.”* To which his brother, Sonny, answered, *“Well, then, why don’t you just quit college and go join the army.”* To which Michael responded, *“I did. I enlisted in the Marines.”*

After a few moments of stunned silence, Michael and Sonny nearly come to blows; with Sonny finally asking Michael, *“Did you go to college to get stupid? You’re really stupid!”*

At this point, the Corleone family consiglieri, Tom Hagen, says to Michael, *“How could you do this? Your father had to pull a lot of strings to get you a deferment.”*

“I didn’t ask for a deferment,” Michael answered. *“I didn’t want it.”*

Tom Hagen then says, *“Many times, your father and I have talked about your future. Your father has plans and high hopes for you.”*

To which Michael responds, *“I have my own plans for my future.”*

And the scene then closes with pretty much everyone in the family thinking that Michael has lost his mind... for walking away from the privilege and protection which his father, the great Mafioso Vito Corleone could give him; in order to strike out on his own, on what looked to everybody like nothing but a fool’s errand.

I was thinking about this scene from *The Godfather, Part II*, as I reflected this week on our lesson from Mark’s gospel. Because, in our text, we’re also dealing with a son (two sons, actually), who make an unexpected decision to follow their own plans for the future... plans which were, without a doubt, quite a bit different from the hopes, and dreams, and plans which were held by their father.

Now, we know very, very little about Zebedee, the father in the story; although we can be sure that he wasn’t a mafia kingpin. He was a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, an occupation which would have placed him squarely in the peasant class of first century Galilean village life. But even though he wasn’t a Godfather-esque mover and shaker, Zebedee would still have had plans for his sons; plans which almost certainly called for James and John to carry on with the family business after Zebedee hung up his nets; and to live in the ancestral village, raising families of their own; and to be uncontroversial members of the local synagogue.

We don't know if Zebedee pulled any strings, or called in any favors; but it's highly likely that he hoped that his sons would always be fishermen, and maintain the good name of Zebedee in the community. And, as our text begins, that's exactly what James and John were doing: they were out on the lake, fishing with their father, doing what the men of the family had doubtless been doing for many generations. And then, out of the blue like a bolt of lightning, these two sons decide to make like Michael Corleone... and follow their own, very un-Zebedee-like plans for their future.

One minute they're in the boat, preparing the nets with their father, looking forward to another day of "fishing for fish;" the next minute they're out of the boat and sloshing in to shore, walking away with Jesus... who's invited them to come along with Him and become "fishers of men."

Unlike Michael Corleone, James and John weren't heading off to fight in some war; but they were doing something just as dangerous. They were setting aside a safe, if unglamorous, future... a future that was known, and predictable, and manageable; and following Jesus into a thoroughly unknown, unpredictable, and potentially life-threatening future, to go who knows where, in order to face who knows what. They were stepping out of the fishing boat, and into a genuine "great unknown..." and whatever else their new plans would hold for them, it would mean that their days as fisherman were over forever.

And, as the text tells us, father Zebedee was left behind in the boat with the hired servants... to wonder what on earth his boys were up to; and to ponder how on earth their quiet family life had taken such an unlikely, and unexpected, turn.

I've often wondered how Zebedee felt... as he watched his two beloved sons wade out of the lake, and hitch their futures to the ministry of Jesus. Was he angry that these two young men would just summarily dump all the fishery work in his lap... in order to traipse off after some itinerant rabble-rouser, who, Pied Piper-like, had called out to them to follow? Did he think that James and John were being foolish? Stupid... a la Michael Corleone? Or just plain irresponsible?

Was he worried that his sons might be setting themselves up for a serious pratfall... did he fear that his boys might be putting themselves in the way of a lot more harm than they realized at the moment, when hooking up with Jesus looked like such a grand and exciting adventure? I mean, even at this early stage, Jesus was making powerful enemies; and Zebedee had to know that, if there were people out there who hated Jesus, they'd be just as hateful to Jesus' friends... including James and John.

Or was he thrilled that his sons had been given the opportunity to be part of a budding messianic movement? Was he proud of his boys, and the fact that Rabbi Jesus had counted them worthy to be members of the crew that would go out and proclaim the arrival of the longed-for Kingdom of Heaven? Hey, my Dad was pretty stoked when I told him that I'd received a call to ministry... and was thinking about going off to Princeton Seminary after I graduated from college. Maybe Zebedee was similarly happy. Or maybe he was a little bit angry, a little bit worried, and a little bit happy... all at the same time.

Unfortunately, the New Testament gives us not a clue as to how old Zebedee might have felt about it all... as James and John took their places within the inner circle of Jesus' closest friends and followers. After this event on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Zebedee disappears from the gospel record; and the only other thing we hear about Zebedee's family is that, according to

the gospel of Matthew, Zebedee's wife, the mother of James and John, was present at the crucifixion of Jesus.

The mention of Zebedee, being left behind in the fishing boat when James and John were called to be disciples, seems like just a small, nearly irrelevant detail of the story... an insignificant piece of minutiae, referenced by Mark simply to give a little texture to what is an otherwise pretty barebones story. But, can we learn something meaningful about our life of faith and discipleship, by considering the experience of James, and John, and Zebedee... on that fateful morning on the shore of the Sea of Galilee? Actually, I believe that we can!

What does the story of James and John leaving their father Zebedee behind in the fishing boat, have to say to us... as we pursue our own life of Christian faith and discipleship? Well, certainly it reminds us that, when Almighty God is part of our life, we should expect the unexpected. Today, nearly two thousand years later, after we've heard these gospel stories dozens and dozens of times... the idea of James and John being disciples of Jesus sounds like a natural part of the scenery of life. Of course they were disciples! What else would you expect? Duh!

But at the time that the story took place; when they were sitting in that boat preparing nets with their father; the thought of James and John being called by Jesus to be part of the messianic movement that would save the world... made about as much sense as trying to start a carrot ranch on Pluto.

Remember, James and John were social nobodies. Zebedee might have been a nice guy and a respected man in the village, but in the larger scheme of things, he, too, was a nobody. From the point of view of the larger society of the Roman Empire, these people were about as insignificant and unimportant as you can get. And I promise you that on that morning, when Jesus made his disciple-calling pass by the lake, the number of people who foresaw a major theological role in the future of James and John was exactly zero. They were fishermen today; they'd be fishermen tomorrow; they'd be fishermen till the day they died. Period.

But then Jesus comes along, shouts out, *"Hey, follow me! And I'll change your life forever!"* And you and I are talking about James and John, here in Southampton, New York, twenty centuries later. So, there's nothing wrong with making plans; there's no sin in trying to set a wise course for the future; it's perfectly fine to have hopes and dreams and expectations for the days ahead. But we must just never forget that all of our plans are provisional... and subject to the will and wisdom of God, and our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord just might have some plans for any one of us, or for all of us, that we'd never even thought of before.

This story also reminds us that following Jesus out of the fishing boat, while perhaps unexpected, is certainly not stupid; in fact, it's pretty darn courageous. Michael Corleone was called stupid and a sap for walking away from college and the family "plan," and enlisting in the Marines; and you can be sure that very few, if any, of the people who watched James and John walk away from their fishing careers to enlist in Jesus' movement, weren't thinking the very same thing about them.

I mean, on the surface, it might seem a bit sappy to abandon the relative security of the fishing boat... in order to follow Jesus into an itinerant life of equally hard, and often thankless, work. And, other than having to deal with the occasional storm that would blow out of the desert and stir up the Sea of Galilee, fishing for a living was usually pretty safe. But, although James and John couldn't have known it at the time, following Jesus would be anything *but* safe.

There'd be countless miles of dry, dusty, walking; there's be misunderstandings, arguments, and dashed expectations. They'd be hated by the Pharisees, hounded by the Sadducees, hunted by the priests, and threatened by the ever-present Romans. Jesus would have plenty of fans, to be sure; but there would always be legions of enemies, too. And, as Jesus warned His disciples on more than one occasion, if their enemies hated Jesus and were willing to do *Him* in, how much more aggressively would they come after the people who were mere followers. People like James and John. So, yes, James and John might have looked stupid, as they climbed out of the boat that day. They might have looked like saps. But from *our* perspective, knowing how the story works out, they look like two of the bravest guys you're ever going to meet.

They look *courageous*; because they sacrificed their personal safety in order to help save the world. They look *wise*; because they saw in Jesus a source of life-changing, world-changing, power that would re-make their lives, and the lives of their family, from the inside-out. They look *smart*; because they understood that, however noble the fishing life might be, Jesus was inviting them to be a part of *God's* life. And to be eyewitnesses of miracles, and parables, and the Resurrection itself.

And when *we* have the wisdom and the courage to get out of our own boats, and follow the call of Jesus ourselves... we participate in that very same gospel enterprise. We may not see all the miracles, and hear all the parables, that they did; but we become instruments of God's grace and love, just as surely as they were. And our lives, and the life of the world around us, will never be the same again. So, whatever else you want to call James and John, don't call them stupid. Their willingness to leave the boat helped open the doors to heaven... and people like you and me have been walking through those doors, ever since!

Well, as I said, we don't know what became of Zebedee, in the days following James and John's departure. But the presence of Zebedee's wife at the foot of Jesus' cross, gives me hope that, just maybe, good old Zebedee had become a disciple, too!

In any case, let's be inspired and challenged by the example of Zebedee's sons... and dare to follow Jesus whenever, and wherever He calls us. That's not stupid; it's the secret to a life that really matters! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!