

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper  
Sunday, August 1, 2021  
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**“James Squared”**

**First of six sermons of a series entitled:  
“Apostolic Martyrs: Sacrifices Made for the Early Church”**

**Hebrew Scriptures: Acts 12:1-5 and Acts 15:13-21**

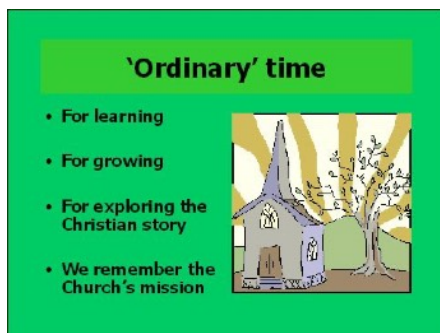


The sermon series we begin today is intended to specifically prepare us for the months to come.



I understand Center Church to be at a pivotal point in her history. On one hand, the forces of history are against her because mainline Christianity has been in decline for sixty years and at the same time she is in one of the most secular

regions of the country. On the other hand, our church has members that are fiercely devoted to her, a beautiful edifice in an ideal location, and a strong financial endowment on which to draw to re-equip her for ministry in the twenty-first century. That our church is emerging and re-launching in a post-pandemic world in which ministry must be hybrid also renders this time pivotal. Last but not least, our church is on the cusp of coming to a consensus on her purpose, mission, and vision after almost a year of very hard work by our Long-Range Planning Team. Centre Church is in a profound state of vulnerability where her light can be easily extinguished yet at the same time all the ingredients are there for her genesis, re-birth, and re-invention that will usher in a vital, relevant, and growing ministry just like the Early Church in the first century!

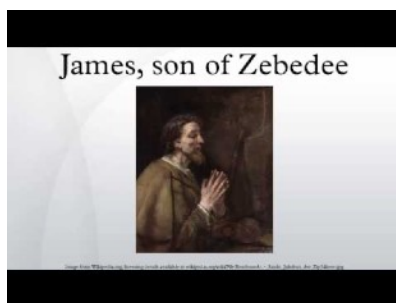


This sermon series is set in the midst of Ordinary Time, a season in the lectionary calendar that focuses on the life and growth of the Early Christian Church. We will learn about the apostles and the great sacrifices they made in order to inaugurate the Christian church in the midst of a hostile world. I pray this

series will be inspirational. I would like all of you to see yourselves as apostles of this church, strengthening her as it begins again on September 12<sup>th</sup>.



There were twelve ‘original’ apostles, otherwise known as ‘disciples’, thirteen if you count Matthias who replaced Judas Iscariot.<sup>1</sup> All but two, were executed.<sup>2</sup>



Today we start with James ‘the Greater’, if only because the James the Greater, otherwise known as ‘James the son of Zebedee’, was the first apostle to have been martyred and the only one whose martyrdom is recorded in the Bible (Acts 12:2).<sup>3</sup>

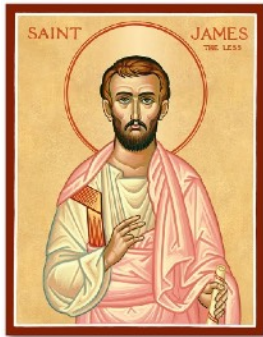
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<sup>1</sup> Andrew (Peter’s brother), Thomas, Bartholomew, James the Greater (son of Zebedee), Matthew, John, Philip, Thaddeus, Simon (AKA Peter), James son of Alpheus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot. Duplicates galore! Two Simons, two Judas, and two James!

<sup>2</sup> Judas and John. Although, there are always discrepancies between recorded history and church tradition. Ken Curtis, “Whatever Happened to the Twelve Apostles?”, *Christianity.com*, April 28, 2010. Found at: <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1-300/whatever-happened-to-the-twelve-apostles-11629558.html>, accessed August 1, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Don Belt, “Jesus and the Apostles: Christianity’s Early Rise”, *National Geographic*, December 2010, 92.

James the son of Zebedee was a brother to another apostle, John.



The other James we highlight today is 'James the Lesser', who was Jesus' brother; he became the leader of the church in Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup> Come to think of it, at Centre we have two 'Lisas', two 'Matts', two 'Scotts', two 'Rogers', two 'Marys', two 'Hollys', two 'Marions', two "Williams", and *three* 'Judys'.<sup>5</sup> Just like the Early Church, our leaders have duplicate names. No one really knows why one James is called 'greater' and the other 'lesser'. It could be simply because the one was shorter or younger than the other. No matter.



What is important to know about James the son of Zebedee is that he was one of the early disciples who while fishing was called by Jesus to follow him. This

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<sup>4</sup> Sometimes, 'James the Minor'.

<sup>5</sup> I am including Judy Myrick in Connecticut in addition to Judy Palmer and Judi Miller.

James was a member of Jesus' inner circle of disciples. He was present at Jesus' raising of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:37), Jesus' transfiguration (Luke 9:28), and during Jesus' last hours of anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:37).

James the son of Zebedee and his brother John apparently had rash temperaments, for Jesus calls them "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17). They were the disciples who wanted the Samaritans to be consumed by fire (Luke 9:54) and they wanted to sit at the right hand of the father and actually said so (Mark 10:35-37)!<sup>6</sup>



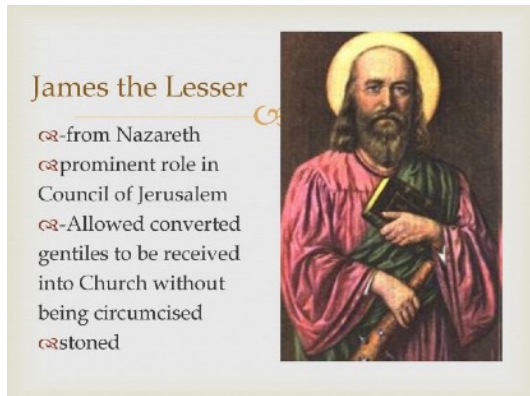
After they expressed their desires, Jesus asked them if they would be willing to drink the cup and experience the baptism that Jesus would. They both readily agreed. Yet, the cup to be drunk was that of execution.



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<sup>6</sup> Donald Hagner, "James", *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume 3, editor-in-chief David Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 617.

In our first scripture reading this morning, we learn that Jesus' foreshadowing comes true. In AD 44, Herod Agrippa killed James the Greater. James the Greater is the first apostle to be killed for the sake of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus.



The other James, 'James the Lesser', was Jesus' brother and he became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Much debate has occurred over the centuries over whether James was an actual brother, a cousin, or a step-brother to Jesus.<sup>7</sup> The Bible states that he was simply a 'brother'.

There are many passages in the scriptures where those from Jesus' hometown and his own family members are a bit surprised that he has become a teacher and healer of importance. This James is always listed first as a brother to Jesus. John's gospel states clearly that Jesus' brothers, and thus presumably James, did **not** believe in him (John 7:5). I can only assume that James the Lesser,

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<sup>7</sup> Florence Gillman, "James, Brother of Jesus", *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume 3, editor-in-chief David Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 620.

like the Apostle Paul, only became a believer in Jesus after the crucified and resurrected Jesus appeared to him. Despite James' late following of Jesus, James became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. In fact, James became such a prominent leader that he is referred to as 'James the Just' for his conservative and ultra-righteous behavior and leadership.



Like James the son of Zebedee, James the Just was executed. James' detractors killed him for proclaiming that the resurrected Jesus sits at the right side of God.<sup>8</sup> In about AD 63, the authorities threw James off the temple wall and then clubbed him to death.

This sermon series seeks to celebrate the sacrifices made by the apostles who enabled the founding of the Christian church. The apostles' witness inspired and grew the church. While I do not believe that torture and death is redemptive,

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<sup>8</sup> See the quotation in the service bulletin:

"To the scribes and Pharisees' dismay, James [the Lesser] boldly testified that 'Christ himself sitteth in heaven, at the right hand of the Great Power, and shall come on the clouds of heaven'. The scribes and Pharisees then said to themselves, 'We have not done well in procuring this testimony to Jesus. But let us go up and throw him down, that they may be afraid, and not believe him!.'" -Eusebius

and while I do not believe that violence should be idealized, let alone romanticized, I recognize and admire selflessness. I recognize the nobility of forfeiting one's rights, liberty, and agency for the benefit of others.



Contrast that with the actions of so many in our country who would rather their family members, neighbors, and fellow citizens die rather than forfeit their individual rights, liberty, and agency by complying with mask and vaccine mandates. What we are suffering from today with the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic is unconscionable selfishness wrapped in American and Christian flags. Those who refuse to mask and vaccinate based on the motto 'Live Free or Die' may just in fact die and take many with them. Their selfish behavior is neither American nor Christian.





Friends, as our church contemplates re-launching on September 12 and as we begin our Stewardship Campaign on October 24, I pray that we will all remember the spirit of the apostles who sacrificed their vocations and lives and thus planted the Christian Church.

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the People of God responded, "Amen!"