

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Helen and I popped down to St. Louis on Thursday evening to spend a day and a half with my family. We went down to see my aunt and uncle, my only remaining aunt and uncle, whom I haven't seen for three years. The trip didn't fit terribly well with my currently very busy schedule. But I made it work. And other members of my extended family who are equally busy also made it work. There are some health issues in my family that gave some urgency to this visit, some fears that it could even be the last visit for some of us. I hope we are wrong about that. I'd like another visit where I'm not so distracted by other things. But even so, I'm glad we went, even if it wasn't perfect. It was good to be together, and to catch up. And somewhere in the midst of all that, as we were talking about children and grandchildren and parents, my uncle said to me, "It goes fast, man. It goes fast." Life he meant. And it led me to think about the different perspectives of all the people present in one way or another over that day and a half, spread out over three generations. It just so happens that we have people from almost every decade of life in my extended family right now, except that we don't have anyone under ten or over ninety at the moment. Maybe we can fix that over the next few years. The youngest among us are looking forward. Two of them are seniors in high school and in the midst of college applications and visits. We have three in college or grad school, also planning their futures. We have some beginning their working life, some at the high point in their careers, and others, like my oldest sister, who are ready to retire. And still others are well into their retirement. What my uncle said to me, my nieces and nephew need to hear. But really, they can't hear that right now. And I couldn't either when I was their age.

So naturally my reading of our gospel text today is colored by this visit and these thoughts. The brothers James and John, already in Jesus' inner circle, are looking to their futures, and in Jesus they seem to have found the key to the future they want. "If he *is* the Messiah," they're thinking, "if he's the one who is going to restore the glory days of Israel, if he's going to be a king like David or Solomon, or even better than David or Solomon, then he's going to need people to serve in his cabinet, to be part of his administration, to be his right-hand and left-hand men. What an opportunity!" And then there's Jesus, who is maybe older than James and John – we don't really know, but who certainly plays the role of the older, wiser person in this relationship. Jesus has a perspective that James and John don't have, a vision of what their future will be, and they can't hear it. He's been telling them what's coming – his arrest and execution, and his resurrection too. He's also been telling them about the difficulties they will face because they are his followers. And none of this is sinking in.

James and John's confidence in what they want reminds me a little of the predicaments we face in the modern world, or at least in the modern first world, as we call it. And I'm thinking particularly in the area of technology, something I've been a fan of for a long time. I entered college 40 years ago this fall as a computer science major. In those days we had to do all our work in a computer lab, which was a set of computer terminals hooked up to a big mainframe computer in the next room. Some of you remember that before there were terminals, there were card-punching machines and card readers. I used those too for one class. Now 40 years on we have way more powerful computers in our pockets and purses. And we have the internet, which was only in its infancy 40 years ago. Computer technology has transformed and continues to transform our lives in both positive and negative ways. One of the positives became clearer during the global pandemic. Through technology we were able to continue to be in touch with

each other even when we couldn't be together physically. I've told you before about how weekly family Zooms have kept me better in touch with my family than I have been in years. The same technology allowed many of us to continue working more or less normally from home instead of going in to an office. It allowed us to continue having weekly worship services, livestreamed from this mostly-empty room right into your homes. It even allows us to shop from home without setting foot in a physical store.

Alongside all of these positives have been some unanticipated negatives. All that amazing connective technology has, paradoxically, also led us to be more isolated from one another. I was reading an article the other day about the decline in "third places" in our lives. What is a "third place," I hear you wondering. It is a place that is neither home nor work, which would be our first and second places – a place where you can be with other people in an unplanned, spontaneous sort of way. The local bar is a classic example mentioned in the article. And the conclusion was that people who have a third place in their lives tend to be happier and more fulfilled. So, congratulations to those of you in the room this morning. You are in a "third place." And maybe those of you joining us online right now get some of that benefit too, I don't know. They didn't talk about virtual community. But the fact is that all our amazing technology has led to a decline in "third places" for many people, and to a resulting disconnection from one another. And this has certainly played a part in our increasingly fractious public interactions with one another. We're losing the ability to be present to one another, to see each other as anything but competitors or enemies, and the fabric of our public and political life is fraying, exacerbated by revenue streams that need to get eyes on devices.

Jesus' response to James and John's "do whatever we want" request is to tell them that they don't know what they are asking. (Remember who will be on Jesus' right and left hand in his glory – the two criminals crucified with him). I fear that's true of our modern lifestyle, too. But even more important, Jesus tells James and John, and us too, that our thinking is upside down, that our focus on ourselves misses the entire point of the kingdom of God that Jesus is bringing into the world. The point of God's kingdom is not to fulfill our personal wants and needs. It is not to make us independent and self-sufficient. It is to connect us to God and to one another through service, through caring for one another, through bearing each other's burdens. And that care is surely also meant to extend to the non-human world around us, to the whole of God's good creation

As Jesus has been showing us throughout this long tenth chapter of Mark that we've been in for the past several weeks, that shift of focus that the kingdom of God requires is a radically difficult demand, and not something we can pull off on our own. It's not even something we *want* when we're left to our own personalized hopes and dreams and bucket lists. Most of the time we can't even hear Jesus warning us away from our dead-end distractions and ambitions.

But Jesus will not give up on us. God's kingdom is near, and Jesus means for us to be a part of it – just not in the way that James and John hoped. By embodying God's care for us through his own life, death, and resurrection, Jesus has opened up for us new possibilities that we would never have cared to imagine, possibilities for seeing beyond ourselves and connecting us in meaningful and genuine, self-giving ways to one another and to the world God loves. How could we not want to be a part of that?

May God make it so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.