BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

“Be careful what you wish for.”
- We’re all familiar with the phrase and we all have a pretty good idea of what it means: you may get what you wish for, but it may very well not be what you had in mind.

A woman ran an ad in the newspaper: “HUSBAND WANTED”.
- In two weeks, she had more than one hundred responses, all saying, “You can have mine!”

In today’s gospel reading, I don’t think James and John know for what they are asking—to be on the right and left of Jesus in His glory.
I find the irony in this story as painful as it is abundant.
- Actually, make that “ironies.”

First, and let us not forget, James and John make this request for greatness just after Jesus third and most graphic declaration that HE will go to Jerusalem where, among other things, the religious authorities will “mock HIM, and spit on HIM, and flog HIM, and kill HIM.
- Just what kind of glory do you think HE’LL be giving you?

Second, two will indeed be seated at Jesus’ right and left in just another week or two.
- Well, they won’t exactly be seated: rather, they will be hanged, crucified with Jesus, “one on His right and one on His left.”
- They are the two thieves, of course, hanging in the places James and John long to be,
- except that James and John would never have longed for that.
- Are you sure you want to be on Jesus’ right and left?

Third, Jesus really doesn’t want the cup HE is to drink, but James and John say they do.
- Again, they have no idea for what they are asking.
- Jesus will share a meal, including a cup of blessing, with His disciples soon.
- And then will come the other cup—the one HE doesn’t want—when HE is not only hanged but offered wine while dying on the cross.
- Is this the cup you want to drink?

Fourth, the first time Jesus was baptized, He was covered with water and then driven into the wilderness.
- In what we might call His second baptism, Jesus is covered fully with the human condition, even unto death, and thus driven to the extreme of what it means to be human.
- Again, James and John have no idea what He is saying or what they are requesting.
- Do you want really want to share in this baptism?

Fifth, and really underscoring the range and diversity of these ironies, look at the confidence with which James and John declare their commitment, as unbounded as it is unfounded:
- “Can you do these things that I must face?” Jesus asks.
- “We can!” they declare.
- Really?
“Be careful what you wish for.”
- That’s the warning of this old adage—that what we hope for, what we think we want, ends up not quite meeting our expectations.
When we go to vote, we go with a clear idea for what we are wishing.
- Yet what we hoped for, even when our candidates win, is often not exactly what we wanted.
The danger in our wishing is that we can end up in a constant state of want for something in the future that prevents us from finding satisfaction or peace in the now.
- A perpetual perspective toward the future keeps us from what we could be seeing, or should be seeing in the present.
- We end up so focused on the future that the meaning of the here and now is often overlooked—even dismissed.
- How could today compare with our wishes, our hopes, our wants for tomorrow?
After all, what we wish for is often to get past our present and escape the now.
- Something better is surely on the horizon.
  - Yet, that utopia often gets the best of us, convincing us of a happier life, a life free of that which causes the sadness and suffering we think we can overcome—and usually on our own.
  - We have a pretty good track record of believing that we can achieve our own glory, our own heaven, by the choices we make, rather than believing in Jesus’ glory.
And yet, often not imagined in these kinds of forward-looking plans is just how different our lives may actually be once we get there.
- There might have been some hints along the way, but they are frequently ignored in favor of what we believe the future holds.
- The wish is so strong, the pull toward achieving the unattainable is so appealing, that the truth and the consequences, the actual effects of our choices on our lives, gets obscured.

Stories like this one from Mark’s gospel are just the mirrors we need so we can see our true selves—not always pleasant, but often necessary, especially so that we can then engage in some much-needed self-correction and self-interpretation.
- It would be easy to point fingers at James and John for their inability to hear the truth of Jesus’ predictions of His suffering and death.
- It would be simple to chastise them for a gross misinterpretation of Jesus’ power and reign.
  - Yet it’s in just that moment, when we find ourselves judging others for not seeing the obvious, that we should stop and wonder whether or not we have correctly and appropriately interpreted what we have assumed about who Jesus really is.
  - It might not be as clear as we would like it to be.

Perhaps the greatest irony of this story—indeed of the whole Gospel—is that even though we have heard it, know it, even believe it, we are still amazingly adept at ignoring the observable,
- in part because we simply cannot let go of what we think is better on the other side.
- And yet, that greener grass is rarely actually so.
- Thus, as a result, a bit of self-reflection is essential.
What is it that we really want and why?
- Is it escape from present situations, responsibilities, and accountability?
- Is it a jackpot win that surely will bring security and freedom from worries?
- Is it an earthly savior who has all the answers and will make everything happen just as she or he promises?
It’s no accident that this conversation happens when it does in Mark.
- Only a few verses later, JESUS will go to Jerusalem, a perceived king; yet the welcome He receives shows how much His kingdom is misunderstood.

This story, however, makes an important theological claim that could easily be overlooked by thinking that we could do better, would be better, than James and John:
- that were we there, surely, we would have heard JESUS, understood JESUS, and in our enlightened and lofty state, have fared better.
But that theological claim is this: once we actually arrive at our wished-for reality and it ends up not being for what we had hoped, JESUS will be there waiting.
- When things don’t turn out the way we dreamed, JESUS is there to offer a different vision for how life might be better.
  - “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.”
  - Except that He doesn’t just say it; He shows it, lives it, embodies it on the cross.

Which may explain another of the greatest ironies, not just of this Gospel, but of the way all the Bible has been read throughout the centuries.
- Because JESUS does indeed point, not merely to His impending death, but to His self-emptying and of its significance: “For even the SON OF MAN did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”
- We’ve taken this word “ransom” and fashioned a logical but utterly graceless theory about substitution and payment for sin.
But what if JESUS is simply saving us?
- Saving us from ourselves?
- Ransoming us from the future we think we want,
  - from the baptism and cup which James and John believe they need,
  - from the glory they and we misunderstand,
  - from the life we’ve been urged to strive for but which we ultimately find is not abundant,
  - from viewing companions and competitors and fellow children of GOD as threats?

The great irony of the human condition is that when GOD came to us, fully and completely as we are, joining GOD’s abundant love to our mortal life, embodying GOD’s complete acceptance and grace in human flesh, we completely misunderstood it and fled from it.
- And yet, JESUS came and still does.
  - Three times JESUS tells the disciples what will happen in Jerusalem.
  - Three times they misunderstand.
- Yet He goes there anyway.
  - He keeps marching, keeps healing, keeps loving, keeps serving, keeps giving HIMSELF to save us from ourselves.
  - And He will continue to do just that until all of us are saved, overwhelmed, drowned, crucified, and raised again by GOD’s unending, all-encompassing love.

The good news is that you don’t have to be careful what you wish for in JESUS,
- because in JESUS that is exactly what you get.