In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is from our Gospel Lesson, Mark 10. It is the disappointing request James and John ask of Jesus. The passage goes this way:

36And [Jesus] said to [James and John], “What do you want me to do for you?” 37And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”

From this story, we can conclude that it is possible for a disciple to walk a good long ways with Jesus and yet still need to grow in discipleship — still need to grow in the spirit of Jesus. I worry about this because some of us have been walking with Jesus a good long time now, ever since we were baptized, but the example of James and John presses the question of maturity upon us. Have we been following Jesus all these years without really maturing much in our faith? Have we been walking with Jesus all this time without making much progress in giving our lives to him and growing in his spirit? Have we been disciples of Jesus but pretty much remaining our old selves? I do not want that for us! I want us to be changed in a more Christ-like direction by our years of coming to church, of loving Jesus and walking with him.

This request of James and John: It is as if the time and miles with Jesus have been to no avail. The request to sit at the right hand and the left hand in glory is a request that James and John could have made even before they ever met Jesus. It is an ordinary kind of request. It is depressingly ordinary in its selfishness. It is a human kind of request, a natural request, but it is a request untouched as yet by the spirit of Jesus. Have James and John been walking with Jesus but with no benefit? Has the journey with Jesus left them unchanged? Has the spirit of Jesus failed to move them much?

My wife, Carol, pointed out to me that the portion of St. Mark’s Gospel that could be called “the way of the cross,” begins with Jesus healing a blind man — that is in Chapter 8 – and ends with the healing of another blind man, blind Bartimaeus. That is in chapter 10. Three times in this portion of St. Mark’s Gospel — in Chapters 8, 9, and 10 — three times Jesus speaks of his coming death and bids his disciples to take up their cross and follow him. Three times Jesus speaks of the cross, and three times his disciples fail to get it. This request of James and John to sit in the seat of glory follows right after the third of our Lord’s sayings about the cross. They hear Jesus talk about the cross and they respond by requesting seats of glory in his kingdom. Who really is the blind one? Jesus heals a blind man at the beginning of the section
and at the end of the section, but healing a blind heart is a hard thing to do. In the end, by God’s grace, James and John will become great saints and heroes of our faith. But not now. Their requests for seats of glory reveal them to still be pretty immature in their faith. They still have a long ways to go to walk in the spirit of Jesus Christ.

I think it is a major stroke of God’s grace that the writers of our lectionary should pair the story of James and John with that sublime Chapter in Isaiah about the Suffering Servant. Martin Luther believed that the prophet Isaiah was a powerful preacher of the gospel, equal to Matthew, Mark and Luke. About our chapter in particular – Isaiah chapter 53 – Luther says this:

Thus when Isaiah in chapter fifty-three says how Christ should die for us and bear our sins, he has written the pure gospel.¹

Consider the spirit of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. He is willing to suffer for the people. He is willing to suffer without complaint. And so Isaiah says this:

7He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearer is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. (Isaiah 53:7, RSV)

Jesus opened not his mouth, so that, as the Gospel puts it, Pilate marveled. The passage goes this way:

³And the chief priests accused [Jesus] of many things: but he answered nothing. ⁴And Pilate asked him again, saying, Answerest thou nothing? behold how many things they witness against thee.⁵But Jesus yet answered nothing; so that Pilate marvelled.( Mark 15:3-5, KJV)

So, Jesus opens not his mouth. But James and John now open their mouths and requests seats of glory in his kingdom.

Think ahead, if you will, to our Good Friday liturgy here at Immanuel. Pastor Thomas Green often preaches for us at that moving evening liturgy. Toward the end of the service, there is a section of the liturgy called The

Solemn Reproaches. We are invited to image the complaints that Jesus could bring against us if he were the complaining sort of person. One of those reproaches refers to the request of James and John for the seats of glory. It goes this way—imagine Jesus saying this:

I gave you my peace which the world could not give, and you draw the sword and strike in my name. I washed your feet as the sign of my love, and you seek high places in my kingdom. I offered you my Body and Blood, and you deny me, scatter, and abandon me.

Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal, have mercy on us.

Such a contrast! Such a good Lord we have in Jesus Christ!

All we like sheep have gone astray, Isaiah says.

6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way; (Isaiah 53:6, RSV)

And it is true. We have turned every one to our own way. We have tended to our own welfare and that of those we love. But in the process, we have sometimes gone astray, through sins of commission and omission. Our focus on ourselves has tempted us to neglect the good we could have done. It has made us poorer people, people who have fallen short of the nobility our Maker wants for us, people who need some help. And so Jesus helped us:

6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

And Jesus accepted that burden and that suffering. That is the spirit of Jesus. But it is not yet the spirit of James and John. I feel that they have some growing to do. And perhaps you and I do too.

St. Paul has a lovely saying about Christian maturity. He recognizes that it is possible to remain childish in our faith. Well, he does want us to be children in certain ways, but he also wants us to grow. His saying goes this way:

20 Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking;
rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults. (1 Corinthians 14:20, NRSV)

And when the apostle urges us to be “adults,” he means that we should grow in a Christ-like manner. We should seek to become more like Jesus, who, as our Gospel Lesson puts it, “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (John 10:45, RSV)
And so, let us take to heart a question that could well trouble us: we have been walking with Jesus a good long way now—many of us have. Is it not time that we match this length of time with growth in piety — even conformity to Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.