The Chosen S2E1: “Thunder” Scripture Reading: Psalm 33:1-15

Sept. 15th, 2024 Memory Verse: Psalm 33:11

**SLIDE 1**

 Today marks the beginning of a new series for us here at Forest Hills. Last year, about this time, we watched season 1 of the Chosen and now we are picking up where that left off and taking a look at season 2. Now I realize that season 4 is already available and that production is taking place for season 5 already, but maybe it’s okay to be a little behind with something like this. As we take in the story of Jesus as related to us by the four gospels, I think it is actually a good thing to take it slow. So, if you are new to the Chosen, it would be worthwhile to watch season one…we even have a backlog of the sermons I preached on those episodes available on our website. If you have already seen the show, it’s worth watching again especially since we are going to be doing this together and learning from one another along the way. And certainly, no matter how familiar you might think you are with the source material, we can never know it too well. My biggest encouragement with this whole series is that you would go back and read the gospels again.

**SLIDE 2**

Take in the events of Jesus’ life, what he did and what he said. It can be good and helpful to see his story run through a high-budget production and handled by great writers and portrayed by excellent actors, but as is said often, “It’s just not as good as the book.” We need to go to the source. So let The Chosen be a resource and a help to you, but do not let it replace your consumption of the very word of God. The show might be good, but it is not the bible.

 So, having said that, this past week, our grow groups have watched through the first episode of the second season and that is what we turn to today. If you are not part of a Grow Group, it’s not too late! We are meeting on Wednesday nights there is room for more. Please consider signing up or just show up! The episode is entitled “Thunder” because one of the story lines it follows is that of James and his brother John, nicknamed by Jesus as the “Sons of Thunder.”

**SLIDE 3**

Now what do we know about thunder? It’s loud, it’s uncontrollable and if there is enough of it, it can often strike fear into those who experience it. That about sums up James and John. They roll through town loud and proud and they call attention to themselves even without meaning to. James and John also posses a thunderous temper (which we will see a little later) and a keen distain for Samaritans. And, of course, that is where the story left off, with Jesus and his disciples making a stop in Sychar, a Samaritan city.

 Now James and John come by their prejudices honestly. Their feelings about Samaritans were pretty much universal among the Jewish people. They grew up steeped in the understanding that good Jews have nothing to do with Samaritans.

**SLIDE 4**

 Samaritans were hated because they were the product of unlawful intermarriage. After the northern kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrians, the pure bloodline of Jewish tribes became mixed and therefore tainted. The people of Israel were chosen by God, so what was to be done with a child of mixed heritage? Not only were Samaritans off genetically, they were off religiously as well. They worshipped at a different temple and, for a Jewish person, the temple defined who you were. They used their own version of the Torah, the books of Moses. They rejected the books of the prophets. So given all this, standard decorum called for traveling around the outside of Samaria rather than actually walking through it. But Jesus was less interested in decorum and more interested in spreading his message about the kingdom of God. So he went straight through, dragging his disciples with him. At the end of season 1, Jesus speaks with a woman at the historical Jacob’s well, the account of which is found in John chapter 4. After this conversation, the woman is convinced that Jesus is the Messiah and she runs off into town to tell everyone about this man.

**SLIDE 5**

Her news is well received. People believe her. And once Jesus shows up, he confirms everything and after hearing him for themselves, the Samaritan people believe him. Then Jesus is requested by the people to stay with them, so he and his party stay in Samaria for two days. John records that many believed because of his word.

 That is really all we know about Jesus’ adventures in Samaria. This episode fills in these two days with some speculation, but one thing it does portray well is the way in which Jesus was received. People heard him speak and he his words were accepted and believed. It was apparent to them that Jesus was the Messiah. So as word spread and people flocked to hear him speak, there is a great scene where the disciples start arguing with each other as they eat around a table.

**SLIDE 6**

James and John have a great plan moving forward that they want to implement. They have a whole itinerary carved out for Jesus. But Simon is not happy to have a couple of loud-mouthed bozos hone in on his leadership of the group. He has deemed himself to be Jesus’ personal bodyguard. He is not about to hand over that job. So, the disciples bicker back and forth trying to lay out a schedule that strategically gets Jesus not only in front of the most people but also the most important people. Should he meet with the priest or the town treasurer? Then there are matters of security to be considered. What’s the best way to keep Jesus safe in the dangerous realm of Samaria? Finally, Simon asserts, “He goes where he wants, when he wants.” This is something Jesus followers knew all too well.

**SLIDE 7**

They find themselves in the detestable, filthy Samaria because Jesus goes where he wants, when he wants. Their attempts to control Jesus are of course completely silly and wrongheaded…until of course we find ourselves doing the same. It’s easy to judge harshly these silly disciples but…we are just the same. How often do we make our plans first and then ask God to bless them? How often do we invite Jesus to walk with us on the way to our own goals? If we are honest, I think we would admit that we tend to plan first and pray later. Our question for the day:

**SLIDE 8**

 Is Jesus looking for planners or planters? None of these disciples would be in Samaria in the first place if Jesus had not led them there and forced them to come. All of them would have avoided such a place. Each of them would have planned to take the long way around. But Jesus knew the spiritual reality. He knew that Samaria was a plowed field. The people there were ready to hear and accept the good news of the kingdom. Jesus does not need planners, he needs planters.

 Planting, of course, is hard work.

**SLIDE 9**

James and John are depicted in the film doing an odd job for Jesus as they toil under a hot sun, picking large rocks out of a field as they plow up the dirt with a sad looking plow made out of sticks and twine. And as they created a rut in the ground, they would plant a seed, establishing something that would far outlast the sweat they poured out. According to Jesus’ request, they were planting something for the future. And this is why God’s plan is so good. He can see all ends. He understands what is to come and he has it all worked out. For myself, I can plan out a worship service. I can maybe layout a weekend, but I know that if I go out any further than that, whatever plan I make will inevitably be changed. There are simply too many factors to consider. Too many other people involved it is clear to me that the plans we make as humans are so fallible, so short-sighted and, in our plans, we usually don’t set aside time to plant seeds. We are always on to the next thing. We keep ourselves so busy. We need to stop, repent. Surrender out plans in exchange for the grand-plan of the God who has it all worked out. Do we trust his plan or do we want to keep penciling things on our calendar? Are we planners or planters?

**SLIDE 10**

 My sister Laura and her husband Scott put a wrinkle in our family’s plans recently. They are currently settling into their new home in Central Asia. They will likely not be returning to the United States for at least two years. They have decided to answer the call that they believe God has placed upon their lives. They decided to exchange their plans for God’s and dedicate their efforts to planting seeds in a country where under one percent of the population are Christians. But the plan was for Scott, who is an engineer and a brilliant guy, to earn a good living and for Laura, who is a doctor of physical therapy, to work when and if she wanted. And their two kids, my niece and nephew, would be a part of all the family events and birthday parties and overnights and everyone would live close by. The plan was for them to live a comfortable life; a normal life. Serve the Lord, of course, but isn’t this missionary thing a little much? It just doesn’t jive with the plans the family has made for you. But God has other plans. And my other sisters and my parents and I and my kids and all the cousins, we are learning to trust in the goodness of God’s plans, we are learning to be planters and not planners.

**SLIDE 11**

Luke 9 records an exchange between Jesus and the Sons of Thunder. Luke tells the story of Jesus healing a boy by casting out an evil spirit. As he did this, Luke reports in verse 43, “Everyone was overwhelmed by God’s greatness.” And while everyone was still marveling, Jesus drops a bomb on his disciples. He tells them that he is going to be handed over into human hands. But, Luke says in verse 45, they did not understand what he meant. The meaning of Jesus’ words was hidden from them and they were afraid to ask him to clarify. In verse 46 an argument breaks out among the disciples, not about what might be the best plan moving forward, or the best strategy for Jesus’ ministry, but about which one of them was the greatest. So we have these men, none of whom understand what Jesus has most recently said, trying to best one another. Jesus just brings a little child before them. “Be like this child…Whoever is least among you is the greatest.” Then John pipes up in verse 49, “Master, we saw someone throwing demons out in your name…But don’t worry, we tried to stop him since he isn’t a part of our group.” So let’s not miss what is happening here. Jesus just rebuked the arrogance of his disciples. He uses a child as an example and John acts like he heard none of this. Like thunder, his thoughts were so loud in his own head he could not even hear Jesus. And the thunder rumbles as John fishes for a gold star. “We saw this guy doing stuff, but he is not one of us specially chosen, elite, hand-picked followers of you. So we thought, since he is certainly not as important as we are, we better put a stop to his nonsense.” And did Jesus give him the pat on the back he was planning on receiving? No, verse 50, “Do not stop him, because whoever isn’t against you is for you.” In other words, “Don’t do that John! Don’t thunder and rain on someone just because you think they are not on your team! Don’t assume everyone is your enemy just because you and your brother tend to come off as loudmouthed hotheads.”

 But there is more. As Jesus made plans to go to Jerusalem, he decided to enter into Samaria along the way. This would be a different event than what is depicted in the film, but here they are in Samaria and the villagers there refuse to welcome Jesus. This is quite a different response from Jesus’ first visit to Samaria when the people asked him to stay. James and John, the Sons of Thunder, cannot contain themselves. The thunder starts to rumble and they respond in verse 54,

**SLIDE 12**

 “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to consume them?” Luke lets us know that Jesus spoke sternly to them and they continue on their way. The CEB and some other translations of the bible leave it at that. But some manuscripts include a response from Jesus in this verse. Some scholars gauge these words to be added later so Jesus did not actually say them. But I thought I would share with you the response questionable though it may be. James and John see here the Samaritans insult Jesus by refusing to show basic hospitality and they ask Jesus,

**SLIDE 13**

“Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to consume them?” And some texts add, “Like Elijah did?” So the amazing stories of Elijah are on the minds of the Sons of Thunder and they are ready to rumble. Then Jesus, may or may not have said, “You do not know what manner of spirit you are of, for the Son of Man came, not to destroy people’s lives, but to save them.” That is the plan…to save people! Whether or not they are Jews or Samaritans, Americans or Iranians, Russians or Ukrainians. The Sons of Thunder had a much different plan…lash out, consume, destroy, get revenge! Their plan was to bring harm, to expressly not save. And Jesus corrects these men. “That is not the plan.” And as Jesus says in the film, “We are in Samaria to plant seeds, not burn bridges.” He says to these brothers, “I need you to help show the way. To be humble.”

 Jesus can take care of himself. He certainly doesn’t need any of us to call down fire from heaven. He has a plan. We are the ones who cannot take care of ourselves. Our plans revolve around our wants, our priorities, our comfort. We would not choose to stay in Samaria, or move to Central Asia, if it were not for the leading of Jesus. His plan is for us to plant.

 In the movie, Melech, an injured Samaritan asks Jesus point blank, “What do you want?” And Jesus replies, “Believe my words. Return to synagogue. Search Torah. Let it affect your heart. See what happens.” Anyone can read the bible and follow along with the story of Jesus. The question is not whether you know the stories, but do you believe them? Have they affected your heart? Is Jesus the truth or is he some charlatan? Did he really come to save people?

 We may not all share characteristics with these Sons of Thunder. Maybe you are a little more on the quiet side, maybe a little more thoughtful. Maybe you could never imagine wishing that fire falls from heaven to destroy someone who insulted you. But whether you are more like thunder or more like a gentle breeze, I am betting that you are a planner. We all do it. We all have plans and goals and things we would like to achieve. We even go so far as to make plans for other people as well. But we must remember, God has THE plan.

**SLIDE 14**

 Can we surrender ours in exchange for his? That’s a tough question…Don’t answer it right away. We already know his plan is not going to be the easiest. It will involve discomfort and questionable surroundings…probably some Samaritans, some people who are not your favorite, will be involved. It will require some hard work, some perseverance, some endurance and determination…maybe persecution. His plan will have us planting. But given all that, can we trust that his plan is the best plan? Consider our memory verse: “The LORD’s plans stands forever; what he intends to do lasts from one generation to the next.” We are not to just live for today – according to God’s plan, we plant seeds for the future. Believe his words. Be a part of church. Search the scriptures. Let it affect your heart. See what happens. Amen.