

July 25, 2021

The sermon today is a tale of two dates. Two calendar dates that is, that I think it would be very helpful for the congregation of St James Dillon to pay attention to, to get the most out of for your common life.

The first date I want to talk about is Sunday, November 7. Sunday, November 7, is somewhat distant, still more than three months away. The reason Sunday November 7 is going to be important to St James Dillon, is that it is the scheduled date for this year's annual visitation by the Bishop of Montana. Let me remind everyone what this means. The Bishop of Montana makes an official stop at every parish in the state once a year. This is called, "the bishops' visitation." Our Bishop Marty has been to St James several times over the past two years, but only one of her visits was her official Visitation. That was in February 2020. At that time, she presided at the Eucharist and also confirmed and received six people, according to parish records. February 2020 has been her only official visit to St James so far. One reason for mentioning the next Visitation today, so far in advance of November 7, is to see if there are any more people who want to be baptized or confirmed. If so, that takes some advance preparation, so please see me asap, maybe at the potluck after today's service.

But the other reason I'm mentioning it early on, is that at a visitation the Bishop also kind of checks things out. Bishop Marty will look at the parish register to see how attendance has been. She will ask the vestry and other members about the mood of the congregation, and so forth. It would be

*very helpful* for St James Dillon if, when she comes, Bishop Marty is impressed with the positive mood, the good attendance, and so forth. Having some people to confirm, or receive, or baptize, wouldn't hurt either. My point is, that if everyone makes an extra effort to be here that day, it will pay off. I have seen that the mood here is positive, that attendance is growing, and so forth. Bishop Marty needs to experience it too.

Not to belabor the point, but St James right now is still in a bit of an unusual situation. Due to some recent interruptions in parish life, last year Bishop Marty declared St James to be in an "impaired" mode. Being designated as "impaired" mostly means that St James has less control over its life than it would otherwise. But St James can work its way out of being "impaired." Being seen to be back in the groove again is the single best way to becoming declared as "unimpaired" once more. If Bishop Marty comes in person and feels the energy and love, it can only help. I've been feeling this energy and love, and you all know that it's here. I'm not saying to put on a show. I'm just saying, show her who you really are.

So: everybody, mark the calendar right now for... what was that date again?... that's right, Nov 7. By the way, Nov 7 is the Sunday after All Saints Day. I asked Bishop Marty if St James can observe it as All Saints Day when she is here, and she has agreed. So we can sing for "For all the Saints," and "I sing a song of the saints of God," and so forth, and have a really good time about it, on Nov 7.

The other date I want to talk about is: July 25. Wait—that's today, isn't it? Yes, it is, and the reason for mentioning it is that July 25 is the date of the

annual Holy Day for St James the Apostle, the person for whom St James church is named. Today is St James Day, a day of special significance for this parish. I feel sheepish that I only realized the connection a few days ago, and especially that July 25 is a Sunday this year. With a little advance planning, we could have made today a day to splash out and have some fun. Oh well. Better late than never. Let's do the best we can, starting now.

Let me begin by reminding us about St James the Apostle and his story. James showed up early in the ministry of Jesus. James became very close to Jesus. He became one of Jesus' favorite disciples. James and his brother John worked in the family business owned by their father Zebedee. The family business was fishing. It was a good business, apparently, to judge from the fact that they had at least a few employees. One day Zebedee and James and John and the hired hands were by the sea, minding their own business, cleaning up after fishing, when that rabbi named Jesus walked up and said to James and his brother John, "follow me." So they did. James and John dropped the nets and left Dad in the boat with the hired hands, and walked off after him. For their reward they saw amazing things, like Jesus feeding 5000 people from a few loaves and fish; as recounted in today's Gospel. James and his brother discerned that following Jesus was the most important thing a person could do. I wonder: can a congregation be like that?—thinking that following Jesus is the most important thing to do?

Well, Jesus soon gathered a bunch more followers, and off they went. Jesus gave some of his followers special nicknames. The nicknames Jesus came up with indicated the character of the person: the one named Simon,

for instance. Jesus called him, “rock,” Cephas in Aramaic and Petros in Greek. This has come down to us as “Peter.” I’m not sure if being called “rock” is exactly a compliment. Anyway, it stuck. Two others who got nicknames were none other than our James and his brother John. Yes, the two sons of Zebedee. Jesus nicknamed them, “the sons of thunder.” Or as I like to put it, he called them, “the thunder boys.” Jesus must have had a twinkle in his eye when he came up with that one. The *thunder boys!* We’d have to have been there in person to know why exactly this moniker suited our man James and his brother, but they must have been noisy and hard to miss. They stood out in the crowd. I wonder: can a congregation be like that—make some noise, be hard to miss?

One day Jesus took these three persons, “rock” and the two “thunder boys,” with him for a very special event. He led Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. When they got to the top of the mountain Jesus started praying. Suddenly they saw him shining brighter than the sun. A cloud came over them, and they heard a voice saying, “This is my beloved son.” The vision soon passed, but Peter James and John never forgot what they had seen. I wonder: can a congregation have a transfiguring vision of Christ?

Well, fast forward to after Jesus’ resurrection. The disciples fanned out, preaching the word about Jesus. Our man James did this in his typically noisy way, and came to the attention of the local authorities, who did not appreciate it. They had James executed. James was the first of the twelve to follow Jesus’ example in that special way. What would it mean for a congregation to be first in line, when it comes to witnessing for the Lord?

One last wrinkle about James. You may have heard of the famous pilgrim road in Spain, called the trail, or camino, which ends at a Spanish town called Santiago of Compostela. (Santiago is the Spanish name for St James). The town of St James Compostela is not unlike Dillon, Montana: both are set amid mountains, and both get a lot of visitors in the summer. Walking the ancient way to Compostela has become surprisingly popular, given that it is 500 miles if you do the whole thing, but I know some people who have done it all. It's quite an experience, they say. You feel very close to God. The trail ends at a church dedicated to St James. According to an early tradition, James's body is buried there. I have to say I'm skeptical that James is buried in Spain, but he certainly is there in spirit. Could a modern congregation, perhaps one set amid the mountains, be a place of refreshment to those on spiritual pilgrimage?

I raise a few questions like these just to help us reflect on ways our friend, James son of Zebedee, might be real for us today in this parish. We might well want to model ourselves on him. We know enough about James to tell he that was a heck of a guy: brash, visionary, committed. He didn't just talk the talk, James walked the walk. He is a great example of what it means to follow Jesus. This congregation is lucky to bear his name.

Last week at our vestry meeting, we voted to put an icon of St James in the sacristy, the room there to my left. As it happens, there is a newly empty space on the wall, because the photograph that has been there forever, of a young woman who died a century ago, has recently been returned to her family at their request. It looks kind of empty in there now. What to do?

Well, why not put St James there instead? A parishioner has offered to donate an icon, which is a kind of religious artwork. Hopefully the icon of James the Apostle will arrive before very long, and there will be a visual image of the fascinating person for whom this parish is named. It will help make him real for us. I think that is a very nice development.

So: happy July 25, everyone: it's St James Day! And what was that other date everyone is going to remember?