

The Way of Saint James
Mark 10:35-45; Acts 12:1-3
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There is a pilgrimage that consists of numerous paths throughout Spain and Portugal, with all the paths leading to the town of Galicia in the northwest corner of Spain. Galicia is the traditional final resting place of James the Great, son of Zebedee, brother of John, and disciple of Jesus. Christians all over the world walk these paths as a meditation or retreat. A few may ride bicycles or travel on horseback, but the overwhelming majority walk the paths, uttering prayers or reflecting on blessings with each step.

The paths are lengthy, with the most popular route starting at the French border and totaling around 500 miles. It takes the better part of a month or longer to complete this route (or any of the other top options), and pilgrims typically train for months before making the journey.¹ Travelers regularly stay in hostels—large bunk rooms shared with others—and often eat from the “pilgrim’s menu” in towns along the way, meaning they get the same simple meal over and over again.² Like any pilgrimage, it is not a resort vacation.

The walk is, however, restorative—trekkers on these paths find a new sense of focus, purpose, and energy. They experience a new understanding of faith. As a pilgrimage ought to be, it is hard work...but it’s a good hard work. If someone can approach these roads with an open mind—not demanding any specific kind of prize but trusting that something good will come from the effort—then they often find their trust rewarded.

The pilgrimage across Spain is known as the Camino de Santiago—literally, “The Way of Saint James.” It’ll make you think, the Way of Saint James.

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We have been turning our attention to the apostles during the season of Lent, trying to understand their personalities and experiences as men who followed Jesus closely during his time on Earth and who, for the most part, devoted their lives after his resurrection to spreading the word about Jesus’ life. The apostles have an elevated place in the kingdom of Christ, often appearing as the inner circle of believers. Within that circle, there are three who seem to be particularly esteemed or beloved: Peter, James, and John. They are the three who stand witness as Jesus raises Jairus’s daughter from the dead, they are the three who are present on the Mount of Transfiguration as Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus, and they are the three invited to retreat with Jesus in Gethsemane when Jesus is at his weakest. These three men—Peter, James, and John—are the ones who experience all that Jesus allows humanity to take in, whether that is healing or glory, miracle or agony. These are the three to whom Jesus opens up the most.

¹ “Walking the Camino de Santiago: How to Plan Your Trip.” <https://www.exploreworldwide.com/blog/walking-the-camino-de-santiago-how-to-plan-your-trip>

² Gilmour, Leslie. “What is Food Like on the Camino.” <https://www.caminoadventures.com/blog/what-is-food-like-on-the-camino/>

They are, then, the three whom we might expect to take up the leadership of the new church when Jesus has ascended once again. Peter, certainly, fulfills this role—his work is described in detail in the book of Acts and beyond. John, also, is considered to have outlived all of the other disciples, teaching and preaching along the way. They are certainly two of the men who steer and command the early church in the years following Christ’s death and resurrection.

But James is not. Instead, barely halfway through the book of Acts, James is suddenly arrested and beheaded by Herod Agrippa. His story ends when the story of Christianity is just starting.

Assuming that Jesus knew something about what the future would hold for James, what would make Jesus invest so heavily in James? Why was James included in the inner circle, allowed to witness all of these wonders only to be denied the chance to interpret and share them?

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I think there are two keys to understanding James. The first key is to understand his brother John and especially to understand their relationship. With the exception of his death in Acts, James never appears in our scripture apart from his brother—John sometimes shows up by himself, but not James. They are working together as fishermen when Jesus calls them, and because John is also part of the apostolic triumvirate, John is (like James) present for all of those other special inner circle moments. James and John are tightknit, extremely close in all that they do, brothers in every sense of the word.

Some of their closeness leads to quarrels or, most likely, more than quarrels. They did not earn the nickname “the Sons of Thunder” by always getting along sweetly and gently. These brothers are the disciples who asked about “calling down fire” to destroy a Samaritan village that didn’t want to receive Jesus. The offspring of Zebedee may not have been as brash as Peter, but they were still firebrands, both of them.

The second key to understanding James lies in the story from the gospel of Mark in today’s scripture reading, the story where the two brothers go to Jesus and ask to sit in places of honor on either side of him (perhaps boxing Peter out in the process). They are—again linked at the hip, again demonstrating some fire—focused on glory and honor, on reward and impact, on recognition.

Jesus, of course, turns their focus elsewhere. First he invokes the image of drinking from Christ’s cup—alluding, clearly, to the upcoming Passover meal that we know as the Last Supper. The cup of the Last Supper is a sign of humility and mortality. It is an act that precedes abandonment and trial, difficulty and suffering. It is, in other words, the exact opposite of the honor and glory that James and John have asked for.

Then Jesus doubles down and tells them that they will also be baptized with his baptism, an image of decided commitment. Invoking the image of baptism reminds the brothers that they will choose and cling to the path before them. The trials of the cup that they will undertake are of their own volition.

In this story, knowing that John will live a long life and that James will not, Jesus tells them that their destinies are the same—both of them will drink from his cup and be baptized in his baptism, both will commit and suffer.

In the scriptures and in the promise of Jesus, they are the same. They are passionate and beloved; they are in positions to accomplish great things in the name of Christ; they are fully committed, baptized by Jesus and ready for a baptism of fire. Then the similarities end.

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The Camino de Santiago—the pilgrimage in Spain—came about because the apostle James was said to have traveled to Spain, spreading the gospel as he went. The northwest corner of Spain is significant because it would have marked the farthest reach of Rome’s territory, so incorporating the cathedral in Galicia as the most significant part of the Camino reflects the tradition that James traveled to the ends of the earth to spread the gospel.

It is a little unclear how James actually made this trip—we certainly don’t know what routes he may have taken, how long he traveled, or exactly what he did in Galicia.³ His trip must have been relatively short because he managed to make it and then return to Jerusalem, where he was taken by Herod. After his death, the story goes that his remains made it back to Spain—a story that gets told in multiple ways but typically includes some miraculous and fantastic elements in it. Because the traveling all happened in a remarkably short period, and because there are few known details, and because none of it is included in the scripture itself, there are many who doubt the veracity of James’s trip.

This is the entirety of James’s missionary work: one trip consisting of an unknown pathway to a tiny town in a remote corner of Spain that is known for little else, a trip so ambiguous that many people of faith raise an eyebrow at the thought of it actually taking place.

And yet it is a trip that matters.

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On our vacation last week, we traveled to the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral and spent a day taking in all that it had to offer. Our whole family is taken with space travel, and the displays at Kennedy are incredibly well done. We found ourselves remembering articles we’d read, movies we’d seen, names we’d studied, and the history of our own lives. It is a tremendously reverent, hopeful, and inspiring place.

One man I thought about during our day at Kennedy is an astronaut you may never have heard of, a guy named Elliot See. See was a fighter pilot in the Korean War who joined NASA in its early days, one of the second group of astronauts to commit to the nascent space movement, a group that also included Neil Armstrong and Jim Lovell. Elliot See’s first assignment into space was to pilot Gemini 9. When he was announced as the pilot and the media asked how he’d been bumped to his own mission, Neil Armstrong replied “Elliot’s too good a pilot not to have a command of his own.”⁴ He was a rising star among NASA’s earliest recruits.

He never made it into space. He crashed his plane on the way to a training exercise and died instantly.

³ “The Story of St. James and the Camino de Santiago.” <https://www.spainthenandnow.com/spanish-history/the-camino-de-santiago-the-story-of-st-james-the-greater>

⁴ Morse, Ralph (March 11, 1966). “A Perfectly Paired Gemini Team Falls to Earth”. *Life*. Vol. 60, no. 10. Time Inc. p. 34. [ISSN 0024-3019](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/50000/50000-h/50000-h.htm) – via Google Books. Quoted on Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elliot_See

It would be foolish to say that Elliot See and Neil Armstrong had the same impact on American culture or even on the American space program. But Armstrong himself said that they were similarly qualified as pilots. And it would be equally foolish to say that Elliot See had no impact on the American space program. He was there at the beginning, studying, sharing, part of the community of learning that eventually achieved the incredible and even impossible goals that sat before them.

It is tragic that See died when he did...but his death did not somehow undo his contributions or his character. His character remains.

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The same is true for the apostle James. Clearly, Jesus saw something in him remarkable, something that caused Jesus to call James right at the beginning, when Christ was first fishing for fishermen. Jesus even saw something in James that put him in the same league as Peter and John, somewhere in the top echelon.

Jesus does not evaluate James based on how long he will live or how much he will write or how authoritative his role will become. He evaluates James based on his character, and his character remains.

And the Way of Saint James is, in the end, about that character—about the commitment and the sacrifice on the front end, not about the glory or reward on the back end. When Jesus tells both John and James that they will drink from the cup and be baptized in his baptism, he is saying as much: whether they end up the first disciple to go or the last, whether they complete one dubious missionary journey or influence countless students...they will commit, and they will sacrifice.

Most of us in this room are unlikely to find ourselves arrested by a king and beheaded for our faith. We're more like John than James. But the lesson of James remains significant for any who choose to drink from the cup. It is a lesson to stay focused on each step instead of expecting future honor, to make the most of the present, and to trust that the commitment and sacrifice that we make can resonate through time and space even if our own impact may not seem as glorious as we might have drawn it up.

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Jennifer has an aunt and uncle who have traveled the Camino de Santiago, and I asked them what it had been like. These are her uncle's words:

We don't know the path the Apostle James took, though it surely used Roman roads and bridges through the very difficult and mountainous terrain of northern Spain. But today's pilgrims are not necessarily attempting to retrace James' steps. For me, it was more a remembrance of his spiritual journey, from his coming to faith and love, and his realization that spreading the Word is part of a believer's journey. The Way is a path, sometimes easy, often not, but very individual and unique to each pilgrim. Though I had hours each day surrounded by fellow pilgrims, moments filled with laughter and song and prayer, there were [also] hours of quiet and reflection with nary another traveler to be seen. It was always safe and that feeling that one is being looked after on this journey is one of the special spiritual threads through each day.

On the simplest terms, the Camino is a hike through some lovely country accompanied by a host of interesting and diverse peoples. I am sure there are hikers who are satisfied with that simple journey. I am thankful that my journey included more; more of my heart, more of my careful thought, more remembrance of others, both familiar and unknown to me, and, most especially, more consideration of Jesus' gift to me and the mystery of God's presence. The Way is exhausting, and does not necessarily close with any finality but that doesn't mean it is any less profound and fulfilling. Indeed, it is a contemplation of a mystery, not a resolution.

It is said that the Camino begins at your doorstep, and it never ends.⁵

The point of the walk that we are all on is not the length or the destination. The point is the fact that we are making the walk at all. What matters is that we choose to keep walking the path ahead of us for however long it is there, that we choose to continue to make our Way.

⁵ Don Mulraney, personal email, 31 March 2022.