

The Death of James  
Acts 12:1-5

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*About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. Acts 12:1-2*

Memorial Day is set aside to remember those who lost their lives in the line of duty while serving in the United States armed forces.

The disciple James is obviously not in their number. He was not American. He was not a member of the military. He was not killed in battle.

Yet because James did die in the line of duty serving a cause well beyond himself his death can supply us with materials for a case study to stimulate our Memorial Day thinking. At issue is the loss of James's life, and I want to think about that loss with you along three lines: the nature of the loss, the reason for the loss, and the summons to us in the loss.

*The nature of the loss*

The death of James was the loss of a young man. James Stewart teaches that Christianity started out as a young people's movement. He says the twelve disciples were in their twenties when they became part of the Lord's corps.<sup>1</sup>

Those killed in battle whom we are remembering today were young, too. That is one idea Harry Emerson Fosdick drove home in an Armistice Day sermon published in 1934.<sup>2</sup> His focus was on the Unknown Soldier entombed at Arlington. The sermon turns on the idea Fosdick might have known that Unknown Soldier because he served as a chaplain during WWI and often led worship services for the men right before dangerous missions. If the Unknown Soldier entombed at Arlington was in one of those congregations then he is not so unknown after all. Fosdick drew upon his own experience in the field ahead of battle and called the Unknown Soldier a boy – healthy, able, and fit; a fine specimen of young manhood - who was drafted into service then brutally struck down almost before he had a chance to live.

The death of James was the loss of a family man as well as the loss of a young man. The text remembers in particular that he was a brother to John. The two brothers were inseparable. The pages of the New Testament show them always together: James and John, James and John, always side by side.<sup>3</sup> It is as though where one was the other one was as well. They were inseparable and they were alike. Jesus gave them a comical nickname. I don't know the

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<sup>1</sup> James S. Stewart, *The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, "The Unknown Soldier," *Answers to Real Problems: Harry Emerson Fosdick Speaks to Our Time*, ed. by Mark E. Yurs (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008), p. 50ff.

<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, *The Master's Men* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1959), p. 99

derivation of it; that is never explained. But Jesus labeled the two of them “sons of thunder.” (Mk. 3:17). How very deeply John must have mourned his brother’s loss.

James was a brother and he was a son. His parents aren’t mentioned in Acts, but we know them. His mother was a woman who had high hopes for her boys. Matthew says she went to Jesus one day and asked if her sons could have the privilege of sitting at Jesus’ right and left in the kingdom (Mt. 20:20-29). She was a woman with high hopes for her boys and she was a woman with a great capacity to care. Matthew also tells us she stood at the cross with Mary when Mary’s son was killed in his battle (Mt. 27:56). And now her own boy met his terrible fate at the hands of Herod and she became a Gold Star Mother with a broken heart.

We know James’s father, too. His name was Zebedee. There is no percentage, of course, in comparing one person’s grief to another’s. Each person’s way of grieving is unique to them and really quite impossible to share or to make comply with another’s. But I wonder if Zebedee’s grief as a Gold Star Father might have been made deeper than others because his grief was mingled with guilt. After Herod killed his boy I wonder how many times Zebedee relived that day when he and his sons were in their fishing boat, mending their nets, and Jesus came along wanting James and John to enlist with him. Zebedee sent his sons off with his blessing. Now, with James’s blood spilled, I wonder if Zebedee’s grief poured out in regret: “If only I hadn’t let him go! If only I hadn’t let him go!”

James was a family man and his loss was deeply felt in his family.

That is a fact that touches the ones we are remembering this Memorial Day. Our war dead were deeply mourned by families. Do you remember the scene in *Grumpy Old Men* when Ariel Truax (the Ann-Margret character) asks John Gustafson (the Jack Lemmon character) about a photograph sitting on Gustafson’s mantle? It’s of a handsome young man in uniform. Gustafson’s voice chokes as he names him as his boy, lost in Viet Nam. That scene is fiction in a comedy, but it is no fiction and no comedy.

The death of James was not only a loss to a family it was a loss to history. We have, at least through tradition, the legacy of James’s brother. Tradition associates John with the Gospel of John, the Letters of John, and the Revelation to John – five books in the New Testament. But we have nothing from James. He was cut down in his prime before he reached his full level of achievement.

So now this Memorial Day we are remembering – how many? – young people cut down in the prime of their lives and kept from going on to the achievements they might have reached. The Roll Call of the Dead is a roster of classes that were never taught, books that were never written, discoveries that were never made, surgeries that were never performed, children that were never born, and histories that were never made. What a loss! What a loss!

### *The reason for the loss*

When we study the death of James and look for the reason for this loss of a young family man so full of promise we are shocked to find there is hardly a reason at all. The thing behind it is not rationale but the whim of a tyrant.

Scripture knows and teaches the purpose of civil government. Way back in the Old Testament when Saul was made the first King of Israel he was told that the purpose of his kingship was to rule the people and to save them from their enemies (1 Sam. 10:1). And it is reported that God told King David that he was to shepherd the people in his charge (2 Sam. 5:2). So national government in biblical perspective is meant to govern with beneficence in ways that safeguard and shepherd the people.

King Herod blew passed that in a hurry as all tyrants do. He did not rule in a way that put the people first. He put himself first. He did not want anything to threaten his position of authority. So he placated the base that could keep him in power and he hated and attacked minorities – such as the Christians – who threatened his power.<sup>4</sup> That is what had him kill James. Acts tells us that adulation from the crowd drove him to do even more. “He had James . . . killed with the sword. After he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.” (Acts 12:3)

The cruelty of this tyranny of Herod is beyond stunning. Power intended for good was turned into capricious violence. Herod killed James simply because he could and because he felt like it. There was no principle behind his actions, only whim.<sup>5</sup> And Herod made it all worse by seeing that it took place during a festival. Happiness should have been prevailing. Joy should have been prevailing. Faithfulness should have been prevailing. Herod took that high and holy time and turned it into a time of violent and senseless death all for his own sake.

Those whom we remember at Memorial Day were killed in some such way at the hands of tyranny that was trying to overtake the bounds of human decency. Isn't the cause of every war some tyrannical lust for power and gain beyond a reasonable measure? Isn't the cause always some tyrant's blowing passed the boundaries of good government and imposing upon the life and liberty of people who ought to be safeguarded and shepherded? Isn't war always a ruthless disregard for life all for the sake of selfish gain?

Our remembered dead were killed in defense of liberty and at the hands of tyranny. They fought the lie that one person, one party, one race, or one class is better than another and has the right to rule over others however it chooses as if it is above the law and sacred in itself. Our dead died in defense of the truth that no one is better than another and all have the right to peace and happiness and the pursuit of life.

#### *The summons to us in the loss*

Remembering, important as remembering is, is never enough. Doing something about it is what is called for.

Acts tells us that the early church responded quickly to the death of James and to the arrest of Peter. The early church saw the tyrant's threat and counted it as real. And they acted against it. Those people of faith did not see the horror as something to move past or to get beyond or put behind them. They saw in the death of James a summons to act and they mobilized the church in prayer (Acts 12:5). They organized.

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<sup>4</sup> John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), p. 207.

<sup>5</sup> William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), p. 94.

That now famous day in November of 1863 Abraham Lincoln stood to dedicate a newly formed cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. He thought in particular of those who fought and died for the sake of human freedom just four months prior on hot July days. But he quickly transitioned his brief speech from one of remembrance to one of challenge. He said the real business of the day was not to dedicate a cemetery for the dead but for the living to dedicate their lives toward the high cause of the good and the true. Lincoln wanted the nation to find in the war's dead a summons to action. "It is for us the living . . . to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced."

We should hear the same summons in the hot days of turmoil now upon our nation. We should not assume it is only battlefield deaths call to action. Our Lord Jesus Christ, our model for living and believing and acting, after this Herod's uncle<sup>6</sup> – another Herod – put John the Baptist in prison in a tyrannical whim, took to the streets in a new kind of ministry. Jesus saw in John's unjust arrest a call to action and he left work in the Nazarene carpenter's shop to take up the cause of truth (Mk. 1:14; Lk. 3:19-20).

Let that be said of us! When there is something in today's current events, when there is a kind of heartless tyranny that attacks innocent people to cut them down whether by sword or fist or knee or slander or slur or any such thing, let us hear in that terrible happening the call to serve the truth! I cannot believe our noble and memorialized dead went to their battlefields intending to leave us a country rocked with racial violence, gun violence, political violence, hate-filled rhetoric, a disregard of history, rampant lies, and self-serving interests. They saw and stood for something better and we are meant to see and to work toward that, too. God wishes that we mobilize, first in prayer and then in action, for truth and justice and righteousness. That is how the death of James inspired the early church to act and how those whom we have lost can inspire us to live.

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<sup>6</sup> Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 93.