

## 8/8/21 WORSHIP SERVICE

### WELCOME – PASTOR CALEB

Good morning and welcome to Alexanderwohl, to all of you gathered in this sanctuary and to those joining through Zoom.

We gather for many individual reasons. Each of you is welcome, no matter who you are and what brings you here.

Yet as a body, we are here to worship the God that we have glimpsed and tasted in Jesus.

We are here to feed our faith however small, so that with all the pressures, distractions, sorrows, and pretenses that are part of our lives, we might become a transformed people.

[CALL TO WORSHIP IN BULLETIN]

### INVOCATION PRAYER – ADAPTED FROM VT 859, 994

God of every place,

Some of us see you today from mountains of joy and confidence.

Some of us seek you today from valleys of grief or doubt.

In all places, there you are with us, nudging us onward, with your presence and your light.

Our words fall short to speak your praises,  
and we do not know how to ask for  
what it is that we truly need,  
so we trust your Spirit to intercede for us with sighs too deep for words.

We give thanks that you are here,  
you are at work in this body of believers,  
and you are at work in this world of struggle and pain.

Meet us all today on the path made by Jesus, Amen.

### PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Gracious God,

We thank you that you graciously give us what we most need, openly, without second thoughts, without ever faulting us for asking.

Today we give back a symbolic portion of what you give us with the intent of supporting the ministries and functioning of this congregation.

Imperfect as we are, take up what we give, and use the talents, gifts, qualities, and actions of our lives as raw material as you bring your Kingdom.

Amen

## FAITH, DOUBT, AND TESTING

James 1:1-11

One of my classmates in seminary had the entire letter of James memorized. He recited it once very powerfully in a chapel service. Matt was a big guy. I joined him in a weight room a couple of times, and it was a very humbling experience. Matt was in a league of his own. Because Matt had memorized James well, the words flowed and came with an authority as if they came from my Matt's own impressionable presence.

Over the next month, we are going to spend time with the letter of James in our worship services. James is full of powerful statements that make it clear that the life of faith is one that you have to be "all in" on.

Martin Luther famously rejected the epistle of James, because he thought it contradicted the doctrine of salvation by grace that he found in Paul. In many ways, James has some of the same emphases as Anabaptism, but James still is left in a largely neglected corner of the New Testament.

What we have here is an early Christian letter similar to other wisdom literature of the day, applying well-tested wisdom to the daily lives of faith of the early Jesus-communities.

If you are reading along in James, you may have the feeling that James skips around. This is especially true of the first chapter, which seems to be a kind of table of contents for themes that James will develop more later on in the book.

The statements flow from one theme to the next often picking up on the same key words used in the last them. Did you pick up on some of the themes found in the first 11 verses?

They include *suffering, faith, endurance, maturity, prayer, wisdom, doubt, wealth, and poverty*.

In two slides, I'll show examples of themes that are taken up again later in the letter. Because of space, I'm quoting representative verses.

For example, consider the theme of testing and endurance.

In verses 2-3 he says: “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance...”

Later in the chapter, he comes back to specifically the testing that comes from struggling with our own wrongful desires.

“Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.” (verse 12)

Finally, the theme of testing shows up again in chapter 5, expanded to include any kind of suffering or difficulty in life: “Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.... Indeed, we call blessed those who showed endurance.” (5:7, 11)

My second example is the theme of “asking in faith.”

Verses 5-6 say: “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting...”

This teaching also shows up in the final chapter, as James tells his people to pray with simple trust in all circumstances. Are you suffering? Pray. Are you happy? Pray. Are you sick? Ask the elders of the church to pray for you and anoint you with oil.

#### OUTLINING OUR READING

So let’s back up a bit – I hope your heads aren’t spinning too much.

James starts with a greeting then the bold statement that we are to find joy in suffering or testing. Not what I’m inclined to do. I’d rather complain, feel sorry for myself, or fight the fact that this challenge is reality.

This testing, says James, will produce endurance, and endurance will grow our faith. James seems to say there’s no shortcut – patient endurance is what it takes to reach the finish line.

James then apparently switches gears to praying for wisdom, saying that it only works if you pray “without doubting.” I believe that we have not truly switched topics, however, but that the wisdom we pray for has to do with how to withstand testing circumstances and develop endurance. As a community, Covid has been one of those tests and continues to be.

So we have to remember the character of God. God, says James, gives generously and ungrudgingly. Another way to say it is that God is like a person who gives generously without second thought or without ever taking back what was implicitly offered.

God also doesn’t fault us for asking. Have you ever been in the dilemma of wrestling with whether to ask a favor of a neighbor or a friend? They ought to just say no if the

answer is no, but sometimes we worry they will feel obligated and that asking will become awkward. So we just don't ask.

The final verses of our passage (9-12) have to do with humility and the temporary nature of wealth. In the upside-down Kingdom of God, true greatness is not what the world makes us think it is. This is an important theme in James that shows up repeatedly, and which I'll save for our final week.

#### DOUBT

For the rest of our time, I'm going to focus on what James is really talking about with the word "doubt" and what it looks like to live with a kind of simple trust in God to provide the wisdom we need for the challenges we face.

This will certainly apply to our individual lives of faith, but almost certainly James directed his words to the community as a whole.

A recent book by Brian McLaren called *Faith after Doubt* makes the point that doubt is a necessary path to more mature and deeper faith.

That might seem like a flat contradiction with James' criticism of the "doubter" in verse 6-8. So, we need to be clear on what kind of "doubt" James is actually talking about, bearing in mind that James didn't write this in the English language.

The word James picks for "doubter" is used in other contexts to mean discerning, distinguishing, or evaluating. When it means doubting or hesitating, it is always in the context of prayer or failing to take right action, not in the context of questioning particular ideas or doctrines that may turn out to be human rather than God-given.

There is a kind of doubt that is part of an earnest seeking of the truth, or simply because something happens in your life that knocks the wind out of you and suddenly beliefs that used to make sense don't anymore.

You can try to push those doubts aside, but you sacrifice your own honesty and integrity. You become a divided person by refusing to be honest about your questions.

The "doubting" that James challenges is a refusal to be "all in" on the pursuit of wisdom with an authentic openness of what is true, whether it's what we desire things to be or not.

The "doubter" that James is talking about has one foot in the faith of Jesus and the other foot in the logic of life in the world, where it's the survival (or dominance) of the fittest.

This person wants to pray and be a part of the community of faith, but also wants to hedge their bets, carve out an exception if the moral imperatives of the gospel become too demanding. They over-think in order to not have to be “all in.”

The lesson of James is that faith grows when it is tested, and when we develop endurance. If that’s true, then surprisingly, doubting easy answers, human teachings, what you’ve already been taught, or what you’ve always assumed – this may actually be the kind of trial that leads to the growth of faith.

That’s at least been true for me – my own seasons of doubt, including doubt created by my studies, felt like a real test of faith. It was scary and painful at times. I could have envied anyone who could turn such thoughts away and not engage them.

True faith is not believing something because it makes you feel better about yourself, or because it insulates you from the uncertainty of life.

It is an opening up of ourselves to an infinite God, who we have no claim on. This God is a mystery beyond our comprehension, yet we dare to make the leap of faith that at the bottom of reality is a God who loves us and is with us.

It is the trust that God will provide the wisdom we need in whatever kind of time we are going through, individually or as a community.

It is believing that rather than living in a world where we have to compete to be the richest, the strongest, the smartest, or the best, or for that matter “fake it” in order to appear to be making it... we instead trust in the One who graciously gives us all things without our deserving it.

BROTHER LAWRENCE

Recently, I encountered the writings of a French monk named Brother Lawrence. There is a short book called *The Practice of the Presence of God* that is a translation of three conversations another church leader had with Brother Lawrence and some of Brother Lawrence’s personal letters.

He was a simple, clumsy and disabled man that entered monastic life working largely in the monastery’s kitchen. Evidently, he was recognized as a person who exuded joy, love, and calm, despite the fact that life hadn’t been kind to him.

Though the monastery had set hours of prayer, Brother Lawrence developed a simple practice of keeping his mind focused on God’s presence throughout the day.

He writes in one of his letters:

*“I worshipped Him the oftenest that I could, keeping my mind in His holy Presence, and recalling it as often as I found it wandered from Him. I found no small pain in this exercise, and yet I continued it, notwithstanding all the difficulties that occurred, without troubling or disquieting myself when my mind had wandered involuntarily. ...every hour, every minute, even in the height of my business, I drove away from my mind everything that was capable of interrupting my thought of GOD.”*<sup>1</sup>

If Brother Lawrence sinned or failed in some way, he brought that to God, experienced God’s forgiveness and went on. If he was sick or was asked to do work he disliked, he asked God to help him, and went about life as if God were his constant companion – like having your best friend with you in your best and most difficult moments.

Somehow, I find myself attracted to this simplicity, even though I can’t imagine maintaining such a spiritual practice all the time. I think this man somehow discovered a kind of secret, a secret I still struggle to discover for myself.

He discovered how to make life simple. It’s about loving God with every fiber of your being (and by extension loving others and the world). It’s letting go of what you can’t change, including your past failings. It’s finding strength for each day through the sense that you are not alone but have the love of God with you.

I acknowledge that my life and my concept of the world is very different. I don’t live in the monastery with goal of simply following what a superior tells me to do. It sometimes seems too simple, and in particular I bristle when Brother Lawrence regards suffering or pain as God’s expressions of love to us.

No doubt that helped him cope, but in my view, some people and communities go through suffering that simply should not be, and I would like to think that God would agree. Yet thinking about the problem of pain, trial, or testing in the human experience doesn’t make it go away.

Unlike me or most people I know, both James and Brother Lawrence are willing to accept suffering as a part of life. After all, James says, “whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy” (v 2).

If we are people of faith, we have the choice that Brother Lawrence, and James give to us:

To practice the presence of God in the midst of joy or pain.

To ask God for the wisdom that we need for each day.

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<sup>1</sup> Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, first letter

To find God *in* whatever we are going through, which means that we are never alone. Having a traveling companion, whether God or a trusted friend, makes the journey meaningful.

That's maybe what Brother Lawrence means when he says: "GOD is often (in some sense) nearer to us and more effectually present with us, in sickness than in health."<sup>2</sup>

My version of the practice, when I remember to do so is to tell myself: "Right now I'm doing x. This is where I am, and You are here with me."

It's a way to live in the present rather than regret or nostalgia of the past or worry or escape into the future.

May we take inspiration in this kind of faith in God and may it serve us for the challenges we face today and in the coming days.

#### BENEDICTION

Eternal God,  
you call us to ventures  
of which we cannot see the ending,  
by paths as yet untrodden,  
through perils unknown.

Give us faith to go out with courage,  
not knowing where we go,  
but only that your hand is leading us,  
and your love supporting us,  
through Jesus Christ.

~Eric Milner-White (VT 1068)

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<sup>2</sup> Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, Eleventh letter