

First Presbyterian Church of Redlands  
Sunday, January 19, 2020  
Rev. Cheryl Raine

**The First Reading is Romans 5:1-5**

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because **we know that suffering produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup> perseverance, character; and character, hope.** <sup>5</sup> And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

**The Second Reading is James 1:1-18**

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.

<sup>2</sup> Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, <sup>3</sup> because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. <sup>4</sup> **Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.**

<sup>5</sup> If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. <sup>6</sup> But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup> That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. <sup>8</sup> Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

<sup>9</sup> Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. <sup>10</sup> But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. <sup>11</sup> For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

<sup>12</sup> **Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.**

<sup>13</sup> When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; <sup>14</sup> but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. <sup>15</sup> Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

<sup>16</sup> Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. <sup>17</sup> Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. <sup>18</sup> He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created.

**The Message is entitled *Faith Under Pressure***

Saint Francis of Assisi once invited an apprentice to go with him to a nearby village to preach. The young monk quickly agreed, seizing an opportunity to hear his teacher preach. When they arrived in the village, Francis began to visit with the people.

First he stopped in on the butcher. Next a visit with the cobbler. Then a short walk to the home of a woman who'd recently buried her husband. After that a stop at the school to chat with the teacher. This continued throughout the morning. After some time, Francis told his disciple that it was time to return to the abbey.

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The student didn't understand. "But you came to preach," he reminded Francis. "You haven't even preached a sermon yet."

"Haven't we?" questioned Francis. "People have watched us, listened to us, responded to us. Every word we have spoken, every deed we have done has been a sermon. We have preached all morning."

"The author of James would have liked this story, because for James what happened outside of a worship gathering, where "preaching" would normally take place, is what bears witness to the true nature of one's faith in Christ Jesus. Our faith is lived 24/7, not just during our time of worship. What takes place outside of worship, what we do Sunday afternoon through Saturday evening, is to be our sermon. Or as I have said before, "You might be the only bible anybody ever reads, so what are you saying? What is the nature of your faith that is on display all week long as you move through each day?"

Yet, the Epistle of James almost didn't make the canonical cut. That is, James is one of the books that was contested as the biblical canon was formed. Part of the problem could have been that James only mentions the name of Jesus two times in his whole letter: once in his opening salutation and once more in the opening verse of the second chapter. The other part of the problem is that James was not recognized in the earliest biblical canons of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Yet, James finally received acceptance near the end of the fourth century in both eastern and western Christendom, when Jerome included James in his Latin biblical translation known as the Vulgate.

Although the Epistle of James eventually made the biblical canon, it did not receive a lot of attention for about 1,000 years or until the Reformation came along. Then reformer Martin Luther began to raise objections again. Luther's sticking point with James was the theological tension he saw between James and the chief New Testament books over the matter of justification of faith. Stay tuned to this series, as I will be tackling this sticking point on February 2<sup>nd</sup>!

Yet, back to what Luther thought of this Epistle, for he wrote, "James mangles the Scriptures and thereby opposes Paul and all of Scripture." Luther even called it, "An epistle of straw." And so Luther relegated James to the end of his German translation. Now, Luther may have had objections to James, but at least he didn't exclude it and neither should we.

One last note about the Epistle is exactly who is the author of this Epistle. The New Testament knows at least four James: James the son of Zebedee, James the son of Alphaeus, James the father of Judas, although not the Judas who betrayed Jesus, and James a younger brother of Jesus. The most likely candidate for a host of reasons is James the brother of Jesus, who came to faith after Christ's resurrection and became prominent in the early church, especially among the Jewish Christians.

Now if you were to sit down and read James in one sitting, which I encourage you to do at some point in the next five weeks, you would note that his words are rather blunt and in-your-face. James doesn't mince words and we may not even like what he has to say. Here is why we might object to his words according to Eugene Peterson, for he writes, "When Christian believers gather in churches, everything that can go wrong sooner or later does... so, Christian churches are not, as a rule, model communities of good behavior." Ouch. This is not easy to

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hear. It is hard to be called to account. But that is exactly what James does and why some prefer not to delve into this book of practical proverbial like sayings about our life of faith. Peterson reminds us that, "Churches are [to be] places where human misbehavior is brought out in the open, faced, and dealt with." So, James pastorally confronts, diagnoses, and deals with the misbelief and misbehavior cropping up in the congregations committed to his care and I'm certain that there is value in his words for us today as well.

As I read through James multiple times in various translations, I realized that there are far more than 6 sermons to be preached, but alas that is the time we have between now and the start of Lent! Even in these first eighteen verses, which I read today, a multitude of sermons jump out at me. Yet, I am choosing to focus this morning on what I sense undergirds the whole of the letter and the opening exhortation - faith under pressure.

The congregations receiving this letter were being persecuted by the Roman authorities as well as the Jewish religious leaders. "To Romans, the Christians were troublemakers. To the Jewish leadership, they were blasphemers," writes Max Lucado. And so James writes to encourage perseverance in the midst of these threats, trials and violence. As I read and reread this Epistle, it also became apparent that not all of the attacks were from outside forces, some of the attacks were from internal forces. "When Christian believers gather in churches, everything that can go wrong sooner or later does," because internal power struggles erupt.

So, let's turn to the text, as paraphrased by Peterson, "Consider it sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your-faith life is forced into the open and shows its true colors." Or as Martin Luther King, Junior preached, "The ultimate measure of a person is not where one stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where one stands at times of challenge and controversy." Our true colors, that is, the depth and maturity of our faith is made clear in the midst of trials. Trials are like a refining fire that removes the dross from a precious metal making them stronger. If we persevere amidst the heat of adversity, our faith purifies and strengthens. This refining and strengthening process is why James suggests we should consider trials joy.

Yet, as I wrote on Wednesday, "I certainly do not consider it joy when life throws me a curve. I didn't consider it a joy when I received a diagnosis of breast cancer three years ago." As I sat in the office of my surgeon as she explained my diagnosis and treatment options, joy was the farthest emotion from my being. Yet, from my vantage point today, I can see how that trial showed the true colors of my faith. I was able to enter my day of surgery, trusting that no matter what the outcome, I was beloved by God as well as the cloud of witnesses that surrounded me that day. I knew that God's provision would be enough and would see me through this particular valley.

As Peterson says, "Anyone who meets a testing challenge head-on and manages to stick it out is mighty fortunate. For such persons loyally in love with God, the reward is life and more life." Or as I would translate, "The reward is life that has depth and meaning." My particular trial honed my compassion muscle, as in retrospect I realized I never really had understood the depth of confusion, denial and even anger that comes with a devastating diagnosis. It is hard to wrap your brain and your heart around a diagnosis when doctors talk in terms of survivability. Even though we all know that all of us will die, we don't need a diagnosis that will hasten

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death's arrival. I still don't consider the trial a joy, but I can honestly say thank you for refining and strengthening my faith through this trial; and this I count as sheer joy.

Of course, tests and challenges can come in many other forms as we walk through life, like being downsized out of your company, an expected tragic death of a loved one, a crushing financial crisis or the loss of one's abilities by an accident. People of faith have crumbled at times such as these denouncing God and faith all together, becoming bitter and angry at the world. Even when tests and challenges come dressed in goodness persevering in faith is necessary. Imagine a windfall through an unexpected inheritance, will one's faith inform how the money is spent and what it might do relationships? Imagine a student being accepted into the university of her choice, does her faith now guide the new found freedom far from home? Imagine landing your dream job, does the faith of the recently promoted keep them grounded and humble? Imagine a church, which has received a large bequest, does its collective faith inform how the money is to be spent or do internal squabbles breakout over a pet projects? The true colors of our faith are exposed, whether the tests and challenges are dressed in goodness or crushing adversity. How prepared are we to live as we believe?

In Max Lucado's book entitled, *Life Lessons from James*, he shares this, "When a potter bakes a pot, he checks its solidity by pulling it out of the oven and thumping it. If it 'sings,' it's ready. If it 'thuds,' it's placed back in the oven." He suggests that our character as people of God is also checked by thumping. Not only the big thumps, but also the little thumps that take place in our every day lives. You know, irritating inconveniences like traffic jams or a long line at every checker in the grocery store when you are in a hurry, your spouse who shows up late for an important dinner date or a child who doesn't turn in their assigned homework. Our responses to big and little thumps are a reflection of the true color of our faith. I wonder, do our lives sing or thud?

Apostle Paul writes to the church in Rome, "**We know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope...** because God's love has been poured out into our hearts. James urges us through this letter to adopt a consistent and undivided commitment to God in Christ, trusting that God's love will see us through whatever befalls us. "Let endurance have its full effect," say James, crafting in each of us an ever more resilient faith, complete and lacking in nothing. May it be so. Amen.