

“Joy through the Trials”

James 1: 2-8

We turn our attention to the epistle of James, one of the oldest books in the Bible. And since we are only covering a few short lines from this letter, it will probably be helpful for all of us to have a little bit of background on this letter. James is traditionally known as the brother of Jesus and as in the case of comparing siblings, we can tell that James has a different way of speaking than his brother Jesus. James is a bit more direct, a bit more black and white, and a bit more abrasive than his brother Jesus. There are no gray areas when it comes to James or when it comes to understanding the role of faith: either you have it or you don't, either you are living out the Word of God in your lives or you're not, either you are working and living out your faith as disciples of Christ or you're not. There is no in between.

And because of this no nonsense attitude of James' when it comes to faith and our response and responsibility as Christians, many people ignore or overlook his work as an apostle. The problem comes in that when we do this, we disregard some really great conversation starters as people of faith and we do a disservice to ourselves as people of faith because we limit what we want to know and

understand about our God who created us, in whose image we are made, and who gave us the call to become the people that God created us to be.

So to reclaim this letter's role in our lives as Christians, we must remember that James is writing to a group of people whose lives were already filled with too many grey areas and they needed some and wanted some clear directions when it came down to how they live out their faith as Christians.

James is writing to people who were strangers in their own land. They were Jewish Christians who had broken ties with their families when it came down to religion and they were trying to figure out how to do church in a new age. They were living as pilgrims in a completely different but familiar world. So when James sat down to write this letter, he knew that he was writing to a group of people whose main concern was that they were struggling with what it means to be a person who knew and believed that they were claimed as citizens in God's Kingdom as well as people who were living currently as citizens in the Roman Empire.

Most of James' congregation called Jerusalem home but because of the disruptive persecution that many were experiencing as new Christians, many had scattered. So James sits down to write this letter to encourage them in their new setting, in their struggles that they were facing, and in their new lives as they tried to walk the fine line between citizenship in God's Kingdom where grace, hope, and

peace are the ruling powers and citizenship in this world where brokenness, hurt and pain ruled their everyday actions.

Come to think about-maybe we as modern day Christians won't and don't find it so hard to relate to this group of people who lived some two thousand years ago. James' advice to them still has just as much relevance, power and meaning for us today as it did back then because what they faced back then is the same thing we as Christians are facing now. they struggled with the answers to the same questions back then that we are struggling with today. Back then and now, as people of faith, as Christians, the question that we have struggled with the most is how do we visibly claim our citizenship in the Kingdom of God which is here but not fully realized while living in a world that is constantly telling us that there is no other way to live life but with pain, suffering, and life's every day trials? How do we approach life as people of faith who live our lives, secure in the promises of God while facing the harsh realities of this world, realities of brokenness, realities of pain, realities that tell us there is true suffering, a reality where there seems to be no end in sight to the gloom and doom that fill our everyday lives. How do we maintain our faith while not becoming too overwhelmed with the sufferings of this world?

And James' advice back then and now to Christians is simple. We are to have joy through our trials. I know that this seems like not the greatest advice or

the most realistic advice. it seems like James is ignoring reality and creating an unattainable ideal for us to achieve. It seems as if he is acting like a little child who is sticking his fingers in his ears while trying to drown out the conversation because he doesn't want to face the truth. We have to understand that when James gives out this advice, he is not handing out some sickly sweet platitude which in reality will not be helpful in the end because he has nothing else to say.

Through these few simple words, James is giving us the real wisdom that we are called to live by as people of faith. James gives us this counsel because he understands that faith is refined and strengthened like any precious metal when exposed to fire, when exposed to trials, when exposed to challenges. It is only through these trials that we as people of faith really understand the power and the true nature of the faith that we profess as disciples and claim as citizens of the Kingdom of God.

The good news is that James is not advising us to go out and actively look for these challenges and trials but to remember that we waste a lot of energy trying to avoid them. These trials and challenges are a part of life and we as Christians, are not given any promises from God that our lives are going to be sunshine and rainbows all the days of our lives. The fact is that we as people of faith, as citizens of the Kingdom of God which is here but not yet fully realized live in a world

where things happen, where suffering happens, where good things happen to bad people. This is part of our reality as citizens of this world.

When we hear this advice, we must realize that James is simply telling us not to become overwhelmed by these trials, not to waste needless energy on them but to embrace them in a way, find joy through them, consider them a gift because we know something that this world doesn't know or understand. We know that God is walking along side of us as we go through these trials and challenges. James wants us to remember that we are not alone in these trials. God is there always.

Through this letter, James is encouraging all Christians back then and now to understand that it is only by being challenged and tested, will we ever really know what we believe in and claim as truth is real, will we ever find out what faith in God truly means, will we ever find out what it looks like or feels like to be filled with the comfort and courage of the Lord. He wants us to understand that there is a real danger to pretending that suffering doesn't exist in this world and that we as Christians are immune from it. James wants us to realize that when we base our faith on the false assumption that suffering doesn't exist and it won't happen to us, we are in danger of practicing a faith that is empty, a faith that is hollow, a faith that is shallow, a faith that is not rooted in a true understanding in the character of God, faith that will not last. A faith that will wither in time and fade away.

Only a real authentic faith that knows and has experienced the true nature of God can and will sustain us along all of life's ups and downs, a faith that understands that God is trustworthy, that God is faithful, that God is full of grace and mercy, that God does and will continue to give strength and courage for the journey to all of God's children when they ask, a faith that lived out with the understanding that God never leaves us alone, no matter what trials or challenges we face along the way.

As Christians, we are called to live out a faith that is rooted in the promises of new life showed to us through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. A faith that proclaims nothing is impossible through our God.

The good news that James shares with us this morning is that we have a reassurance from our God that we must never forget as we face life's ups and downs. We know that as citizens of the Kingdom of God all we have to do in times of trials and challenges is turn to God. Turn to God for wisdom. Turn to God for strength. Turn to God for courage. Turn to God for guidance. And most importantly, turn to God for inspiration.

We practice a faith that is rooted in the knowledge that nothing is impossible for our God so why should we be afraid when our way gets rocky, when life's journey takes us to a new school, when we find ourselves at the beginning of a new chapter in our lives, when we find ourselves in a different but strangely familiar

world. We are not alone. God is there with us. All we have to do is turn to God for wisdom and inspiration, knowing that God is walking beside us always, guiding us, and strengthening us for the journey ahead.

The thing that James wants us to remember is that one of the worst things that we can do as Christians is to preach a message that is empty, shallow, and hollow, a message that is not rooted in the true loving and comforting nature of God. One of the worst things that we can do as Christians is not really believe and have faith in the message that we are called to bring to those who are need of comfort, courage and strength. James is challenging us to look beyond ourselves and to really ask ourselves: How are people really going to believe and trust in the Good News of grace, mercy, hope, or believe and trust in the comforting promises of God when we as Christians disregard them ourselves and live out our lives in fear, when we live out a faith that is not rooted in the true character of God? It just won't work.

That is why James is reminding us that We are called to show that our God is so much more than this world's empty promises and hollow words. We are called to show this world that whatever trials and challenges we may face; we are to find joy in life because we have the promise that the sacredness of God will meet us in the ordinary places of life. We are called to share the good news that our God is always there for us, giving us wisdom, giving us guidance, giving us

inspiration to become the people that God created us to be. We are called to find joy in life's trials and challenges because we worship a God in whom nothing is impossible.

May we always turn to God for the strength, courage, and wisdom to sustain us along all of life's ups and downs, new beginning, and challenges that we may face along the way. Amen.