

**How to live in the “in-between” time**  
**James 5:7 – 12**  
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church  
December 11, 2016

**Rabbit Trail**

I am beginning this sermon with a deliberate walk down a rabbit trail that, while not entirely relevant to the text before us, I hope you will find edifying. Our passage today is taken from the lectionary for the third Sunday in Advent. It is from the book of James. James was known as “James the Just.” He was the head of the early church in the city of Jerusalem. He dies, as a martyr, in A.D. 62. And, James was the brother of Jesus of Nazareth.

In the field study known as Biblical archaeology, there are two wings of thought: minimalists and maximalists. An archaeologist finds things buried in the ground. How much connection is there between what the biblical record says on the written page, and what we can expect to find in our excavations of biblical sites? The minimalists say that there is little or no connection between biblical texts and archaeology. The maximalists are more willing to give credence to the biblical written record. The problem, for the minimalists, is that occasionally there are discoveries that confirm the accuracy of the biblical record. One famous example of this revolves around the person of Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator who oversaw the trial of Jesus. Despite Pilate’s importance in the story of the passion of Jesus, there was no extra biblical mention of him in Roman records or other history. This led the minimalists to dismiss him and to claim that the biblical record was false. However, in 1961, at excavations of a first century Roman theater in Caesarea, a stone, dating from the first century A.D., was discovered, naming Pontius Pilate as the governor of Judea. Once again, the minimalists were proven wrong.

An ossuary is a bone box. For about two hundred years, from 100 B.C. to about 100 A.D., Jews in the ancient world practiced the funerary practice of laying out the bodies of those who had died in a cave and then, about a year after death, gathering the bones of the deceased loved one and depositing them in a bone box, an ossuary. You can see hundreds of these bone boxes on display at archaeological sites in Israel today.

In 2002, the magazine Biblical Archaeology Review (BAR), reported on the discovery of the James ossuary. It is a bone box from the first century A.D. Inscribed on its side, in Aramaic, are the words “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” In the Middle East, everything biblical is politically controversial. The owner of the bone box, Oded Golan, was put on trial in Israel for forgery. The trial lasted seven years and he was, eventually acquitted. There are still many among the minimalists who deny the authenticity of this ancient artifact. To me, it is one more piece of evidence underscoring the accuracy of the biblical record.

We leave our rabbit trail and return now to the text before us from the letter of James. James gives us three ways we should live our lives. The first is to live patiently.

### **Three ways in which we should live our lives patiently**

<sup>7</sup> Be patient, therefore, brothers,

James is concluding his letter. In these verses, he touches upon several themes: patience, the return of Jesus Christ, and the expectation that Christians are to be men and women committed to truthful speech. Let us look at each of these themes in turn.

James counsel's patience as we approach life. The patience he speaks of is seen in three different aspects of our approach to life. The first is to wait patiently, as a farmer waits for his crops to grow.

#### **Wait**

See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains.

Some years ago the actor-director Orson Wells did a commercial for Paul Masson Wines that included the famous tag line, "We will sell no wine before its time." Some things in life require that we simply wait until the time is right, until nature does its work. Some things in life are predictable. The seasons come and go. Wine and cheese must be aged. Farmers plant their crops and must wait for them to grow and mature.

James counsel here is to be patient, to resist the temptation to want to rush things. The Doors sing in one of their songs, "We want the world, and we want it – now!" Such an attitude toward life is hectic, demanding, frantic and frenzied. It is swimming against the tide of life. In contrast, James is reminding us that God has woven rhythms and sequences into creation. Learn to live within them. Resist the temptation to kick against the goads. Learn to live within the world as God has ordered it.

This is wise and necessary advice for folk in the modern world. People are no longer patient for the natural sequence of things. The modern world is at war with the world as God has made it. The sequence of life, *natural life* – as God intends it – is quite clear: we are raised by our parents to enter honorable faithful adulthood; we marry; we work; we have our own children; we raise our children into honorable faithful adulthood while in turn caring for the parents who raised us: this is the natural sequence God intends. Yet many in our world reject this sequence today. Lois Ann and I recently attended a baby shower for a friend's daughter who, at the time, had no intention of marrying the young man who is the father of her child. The young woman's father made it a point to tell me how

disappointed he was in his daughter's decision. Life is messy. Today, this sequence for entering and being established in adulthood is deliberately rejected by many. Many choose to live together without marriage. Some choose not to have children. Some choose divorce. Some choose single parenthood. Some choose their work over their children. There are all sorts of ways in which we can choose against what God intends, though it is never wise to deliberately do so.

James has more to say in this instruction on patience. First, he tells us that patience includes waiting. Second, he tells us that it includes constancy.

### **Be constant**

<sup>8</sup> You also, be patient. Establish your hearts,

James' phrase, "establish your hearts," is a call to constancy. A farmer waits for his crops to grow. Sometimes, God calls us to patience and waiting in contexts that are beyond what we have experienced before or can meaningfully predict. Typically, this is expressed in Christian circles through the idea of *waiting upon the Lord*. The God of the Bible is clearly the God of the long haul. Part of our obedience to God is simply learning to wait upon his timing and purpose. The trouble that can arise from not being willing to wait is illustrated clearly in the life of the patriarch Abraham. God gives to Abraham and his wife Sarah the promise that, late in their lives, the childless couple will have a son. The promise is given and the time of waiting begins. Eventually, Sarah and Abraham grow weary of waiting and determine to take matters into their own hands. Sarah suggests that Abraham take her maid, Hagar, as a concubine, siring a son through her. Yet it was never God's intent that the promise given would be fulfilled in this manner. God would give to Abraham and Sarah a son. But they had to wait for the promise to find fulfillment in God's time.

Much heartache arises as a consequence of Abraham taking Hagar as a concubine. Everyone in the family is adversely affected: Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and the little boy Ishmael. Bruce Springsteen sings in his song Long Time Coming,

Well if I had one wish in this god forsaken world, kids  
It'd be that your mistakes would be your own  
Yea your sins would be your own

But of course, they are not. We never bear the consequence of our decisions alone. Our families and loved ones carry it with us.

James' tells us to be patient, waiting upon God in the rhythms of life. He tells us to be constant, walking with God even during the long periods of waiting. Now, thirdly, he calls us to be steadfast in spite of the difficulties of life we may experience.

## **Steadfast**

<sup>11</sup> Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job,

Sometimes in life, we must remain committed to our walk with God despite the difficulty we experience in life. This is the commitment that carries us forward in spite of hardship. It is the commitment of steadfastness. This is the commitment of a soldier about to enter battle. In the difficulty of the battle, things may be confusing, painful, and uncertain, yet he remains committed to his mission. He obeys the orders he has been given. He does what has been entrusted to him, in spite of the pain or uncertainty.

James specifically names the witness of the prophet Job as an example of what he has in mind. Think about Job's story. Job suffers great loss and hardship, losing his wealth and his children. He never knows why the suffering has come upon him and his family. We the readers know why. We know that God is in control. We know that the testing of Job is intended to bring out and show the depth of Job's faithfulness – despite hardship and loss. But the matter is never explained to Job. There may be areas of trial and trouble, of hurt and loss in our lives over which we may never have explanation or understanding in this life. James is telling us that sometimes the patience required of us is the steadfast trust in God even when life makes no sense.

Let me add quickly that the idea of waiting steadfastly, even if life may not make sense, is not – thankfully – the last word. As Christians, we have a profound hope. We are enabled to wait patiently because of our confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ.

## **We wait patiently because of our confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ**

<sup>7</sup> Be patient, therefore, brothers, *until the coming of the Lord*

### **Jesus Christ will return**

*until the coming of the Lord*

What James has in mind here is the return of Jesus Christ. The story of Jesus' is unlike any other who has walked on earth. Jesus died, crucified at the hands of his enemies. But on the third day he rose again. Death could not hold him. For Jesus Christ, death was not the end of the story. He was raised. He lives. Forty days after Jesus' resurrection, Jesus ascended into the heavenly realm. He took his seat at the right hand of God. The promise of the New Testament is that the time will come when Jesus Christ will return to earth. When Jesus came to earth the first time, he came with his glory and majesty veiled and hidden. He was born to a poor family in an obscure village in a nether most part of the Roman Empire. The New Testament teaching is that when Jesus returns, it will mark the end of time and history, as we know it.

James' words then are intended to offer comfort to Christ's people as they face the trials and difficulties of life. One day Christ will return, bringing the story of human history to completion.

Further, James points to the possibility that Jesus Christ may return *today*.

**Jesus Christ may return today**

for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

When the New Testament speaks of Jesus Christ's return, the common theme emphasized is that the Lord's return is at hand. Christ may return today. The point is that we do not know when the glorious day of Jesus' return may be. In saying that it could be today, the New Testament is saying that Christ's people ought always to be ready for his return. The emphasis upon the immanence of Christ's return is intended to remind us to always be ready.

What does it mean to be *ready* for Christ's return? It means having your walk of faith in order: of being a baptized, faithful, practicing member of a local church. At Fairview, we say that we are ready for Christ's return by being a dependable participant each Sunday in worship. It means connecting with others through participation in a small group. It means being engaged in some form of study increasing our knowledge of our faith in Christ. And, fourthly, it means serving others in some concrete way in Christ's name. These are the things that indicate being ready for Christ's return. Not being ready means to have fallen away from the faith, distant and indifferent to the things of God.

Jesus Christ will return. He may return today. Thirdly, James points to the truth that Jesus Christ will return as judge.

**Jesus Christ shall return as judge**

behold, the Judge is standing at the door

When Jesus came the first time into our world, the world judged him. It condemned him, unjustly, and sent him to his death on a cross. James tells us now that the history of world is unfolding before God's throne. When Christ returns, it will be a time of judgment. God, through Jesus Christ, will pronounce his verdict upon the world. What is hidden will be revealed. The things wrong will be made right. The forgotten will be remembered. The lost will be found. Each will stand before God's white throne of judgment and offer account as to how his life was lived. Nothing hidden will remain hidden. All will be known. Everything will be revealed. God, through Jesus Christ, shall have the last word regarding what we humans have done with the life that has been given to us.

The call to patience and the hope of the imminent return of Jesus Christ leads James to one final point in this portion of his letter: therefore, we are to live our lives transparently.

## **Therefore, we are to live our lives transparently**

<sup>12</sup> But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

The winner of the 1995 Best Picture Academy Award was the movie *Braveheart*. *Braveheart* was an okay movie, but it is my conviction that the movie *Rob Roy*, released in the same year, was much better. Both movies are set in Scotland and both examine the themes of courage and integrity in the face of injustice. *Rob Roy* is a leader of his Scottish clan and, at several points in the movie, the story turns on *Rob Roy* being a man of his word, a man of honor. He is the type of man James has in mind; one whose ‘yes’ is a yes, and whose ‘no’ is a no.

James is not being creative in this instruction. His words are the same as Jesus’ instructions in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:33 – 37). To understand this command, it is helpful to know the situation in the ancient world.

### **The problem in the ancient world**

The Old Testament recognizes that there are times when swearing an oath may be necessary or appropriate. (Note that swearing in this context refers to a solemn affirmation, and not to the use of crude or obscene language.) Oaths and swearing are not that common in today’s world in America, but they still can be found when an elected official takes the *oath of office*, or when a person is called to be a witness at a trial, swearing upon a Bible *to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth*.

In the ancient world, a problem arose because the rabbis – mistakenly – made a distinction between oaths that were binding and those that were not binding. In English, we may speak of making a promise *with our fingers crossed*. The idea is that the promise is not binding because somehow the act of crossing one’s fingers negated the words spoken by our lips. (Please note, I am not saying this makes any sense, -- it does not – I am only saying that this is a commonly understood means of negating an oath or promise.) If it is possible to make an oath that is not binding – i.e. with our fingers crossed – then how are we to measure the worth of an oath at all? The ancient rabbis said that an oath that used God’s name was binding, whereas those that did not invoke his name were not binding.

This had a very unfortunate consequence.

### **The trouble with oaths and swearing**

In making a distinction between oaths that were binding and those that were not, the rabbis encouraged people to invent elaborate ways of appearing to make binding oaths, but in fact, avoiding doing so. The net result was something akin to the insurance advertisement where a tree falls on a man's car and he is told by his insurance company that he is only covered if the tree that fell on the car was oak tree. This is not insurance. It is a linguistic game. Something similar happened in the ancient world. Thus, the use of oaths in the ancient world, paradoxically, increased falsehood and lying. The loophole suggesting that some oaths were binding while others were not encouraged *oath taking*, but not *true speaking*. There was lots of swearing, but no increase in dependability. The ancient Jewish philosopher Philo observed that oath taking encouraged perjury! The true value of an oath is in its infrequency, when it is used occasionally, to emphasize the earnestness of the one who offers it, or the seriousness of the context in which it is required. Nothing is added to our promise to *swear on your mother's grave*, or *upon a stack of Bibles*. Rather, something is lost, for such extravagant oaths devalue the worth and truthfulness of our common, everyday speech.

And this leads to James' final point. It is the Christian approach to the question of swearing oaths.

### **The Christian response**

let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no,

All of life is lived before God. Every word we utter is spoken in God's presence. For this reason, the Christian response to the rabbis' teaching regarding oaths is to say that it is a misunderstanding to suggest that some oaths invoke God's presence while others do not. Every oath is made in the presence of God. Therefore, every oath requires the one who made it to do all in his or her power to fulfill it. Put simply, Christians should be men and women of their word. The Christian community values the power of plain speech. All words are spoken in God's presence, therefore all words spoken ought to be true. If we speak the truth constantly, then oaths are not needed. The family of God is to be a place of truth, for God himself is truth.

As mentioned earlier, there are times in life when oaths and vows are appropriate: the vows of marriage; an oath of allegiance in the military; the solemn promises upon accepting office in government, the promise to tell the truth during a trial. But these are the exceptions carved out to recognize the importance of such commitments as we organize our common life together. The rule, however, is that the men and women who follow the Lord Jesus Christ, who claim him as their savior and Lord, ought to be men and women of plain speech and dependable word. This is what is pleasing to God the Father.

### **Review**

The letter of James important theology and practical guidance. We began this study noting James' instruction to be patient, waiting upon God; to be constant in our wait; and to be steadfast, trusting God despite difficulty and trial. We wait patiently because we believe in the eventual return of Jesus Christ. Christ may return today. When Christ returns, he will come as judge, bring the world as we know it to a close. Lastly, James calls upon us to be men and women of our word. We do what we say. And we are to say what we do.

As James teaches, Christ will one day return. I close this message by affirming that truth, and asking, just as James does, "Are you ready for Christ's return?" Being ready for Christ's return means being a man or woman who has placed faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and as Savior. Do you know Christ? Have you trusted in him? Do you look to him for the salvation of your soul? Turn to him in faith today and be saved.

Say "Amen," Somebody!



<sup>7</sup> Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. <sup>8</sup> You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. <sup>9</sup> Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. <sup>10</sup> As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. <sup>11</sup> Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

<sup>12</sup> But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

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<sup>1</sup>*The Holy Bible : English Standard Version.* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Jas 5:7-12.