



“Hearers of the Word”

a sermon by

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I'd like to offer a brief word of introduction this first Wednesday back before we look at our text for today. I've titled our sermon series for this season of Wednesday Worship 'Lectionary Lessons' because we will be meditating on scriptures brought to us from the ecumenical lectionary. The lectionary was formed several years back by a group of church leaders who were concerned that, because of the ever widening points of division between denominations, we were losing sight of our central unity in Christ, and wanted to offer up a tool that could be used across denominational lines, giving Christians a common experience of Scripture in worship each week. There are a number of churches across denominations and traditions that follow the lectionary- which is a collection of scriptures assigned to each day of the year according to the rhythms of the church calendar, and that rotate on a three year basis. I had a friend run up to me one Sunday morning to tell me that the Holy Spirit must have been working through the preachers the previous week, because she had spoken to four of her friends from all across the country and each one of them had heard a sermon on the same text the same morning. I hated to tell her that, while the Holy Spirit was indeed most likely working through those preachers, so too were those preachers most likely working through the ecumenical lectionary.

While not a perfect tool, one of the benefits of the lectionary is that it challenges the preacher to look at texts they might not otherwise consider, and pushes us to draw from the full breadth of material in the Biblical tradition. As we here today come from many different traditions but are gathered together under a common love for the Lord, I thought it might be a nice practice for us to take up this season, and a good discipline for me. That said, our first reading comes to us from a book that I probably would not have picked to preach out of- the Epistle, or letter, of James 1:17-27. Through a contested author giving instruction on life to an unidentified audience, hear the Word of the Lord.

"Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act- they will be blessed in their doing. If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." Here ends our reading. This is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God.

I wasn't kidding when I said that this was a book that I wouldn't normally pick to preach on. The Epistle of James is a feisty little letter in the New Testament that has been at the center of a lot of debate but I'd hate for a debate to deprive us of an opportunity to hear a Word from it. So, while there is much we don't know about James- who he was, who he was writing to, we do

know that he was influenced by the moral philosophers to some extent because of the way he writes, the kind of Greek he uses, and the way he structures an argument as well as the fact that this book looks much more like a series of mini essays than a letter. The sentences are short and choppy, so he's kind of like the Earnest Hemingway of the New Testament. The grass was green. The food was good. No stirring poetry here. But for whatever James may lack in style points he makes up for in conviction. Because in just a few short chapters James delivers an unflinching series of imperatives about the Christian life that you simply cannot look away from. And those imperatives all center around the notion that a faith that is rooted in the gospel but that does not translate into life is a faith that is not worth having at all. In short, that faith without works is dead. "For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like." He says. "But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act- they will be blessed in their doing."

It is easy to hear this message as one that simply demands works of the Christian in order to be loved by God. Protestant Reformer Martin Luther read it this way, and hated the book because of it. We ourselves are perhaps more accustomed to associating the idea of faith without works being dead, or the phrase, 'by your fruits you will be known' with a guilt trip to do good rather than with any journey of faith but there is far more to it than that. For James does not want the reader to simply take on the activity that he deems appropriate to the Christian life. He wants us to tap in to the power of God's Word to transform our hearts in a way that cannot help then but translate into our lives. He wants us to open ourselves up to the frightening possibilities that come when you truly hear the Word of God speaking to your faith and then challenges us to actually live like we believe. If you believe that God's Word can save your life, James argues, then will you in turn pray for the wisdom to live by that Word or will you resort to anger and choose other ways of seeking power and security for yourself? If you believe that all life is a gift, then will you set aside the priorities of your ego that strive to acquire influence at the expense of others and instead seek always and only after God, cultivating the gifts of solidarity, mercy and compassion?<sup>1</sup> If you believe that God's Word and his grace have the power to save your soul, James asks, then will you also allow it to touch your life deeply enough that you leave changed?

The day before yesterday I returned with a group from our church from a mission trip to the Gulf Coast of Mississippi to help out in the painfully slow process of recovery for the thousands of people whose homes and lives were devastated by hurricane Katrina. Incidentally, if you are wondering if there is still work to be done, the answer is a resounding and horrified, 'yes.' This was my second trip to the area and we stayed with a congregant and regular Wednesday Worshipper, actually, who felt moved to give up her job at the Westin to become a missionary to the Gulf and who now coordinates all of the Presbyterian volunteer work camps in the region. Talk about embracing the word 'faith' as a verb. While there are countless scenes of

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<sup>1</sup>Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Letter of James* in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* (Abingdon, Nashville)1998. P. 178.

despair and devastation, of poverty, triumph, and hope to remember, there is one image from our experience that stands out in my mind above all the rest these days. If you were there this morning for example, after loading up your truck with tools and water and demolition or construction materials and other provisions for the day and after coating yourself with enough sunscreen and bug repellent to poison an average sized elephant, you would pile into a vehicle with your group and head along the gravel path of the camp until you hit the road that would lead to God only knows what stories and tears, what unexpected hugs and nausea, and scrapes and aches in your muscles and your heart. But you wouldn't turn off onto that road without first passing a sign. Standing by itself on the edge of the camp- unimpressive though you couldn't possibly miss it. A sign that reads, 'You are now entering the mission field.' Oh yes. And in case we forgot, this is all about sharing the love of God.

If I could I would hang that sign on those doors at the back of the sanctuary. And I would hang it there for you, and for me. Because it is so easy to forget in all of our planning and preparations as a church, in the business and politics of the workplace and in the flurry of the countless other circles we travel in and roles we fill each and every day that this- all of this- is about sharing the love of God. We are being invited to allow ourselves to be deeply and intimately engaged hearers of God's Word- to be touched by the Spirit of God in the places of our deepest fears and vulnerabilities- and to be moved by that Word out into a world full of dread and possibility to witness to the one who is truly the giver of all good gifts, who breathes new life with his truth, who saves our souls. We gather together in worship in the midst of a crazy week and world to nourish ourselves and to strengthen the condition of our hearts so that the power of God can be reflected in the conditions of our lives. We gather together at this table to remember the one who transformed the most desperate realities with a single act of love. And who tells us that we can do the same. Amen.