



MORRISON ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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June 5, 2010
2nd Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon Text: [James 1:2-12](#)
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: [Joshua 5:13-6:5, 20](#)
Psalm of the Day: [Psalm 142](#)
Gospel Lesson: [Luke 7:1-10](#)

Blessing and Joy are Yours

In trials
Through faith

What is it they always say? “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” In the past 25 years for me, plenty of things have changed. Twenty-five years ago I was in the weight room lifting weights to play football. Now, 25 years later, I’m sitting on the recliner watching other people work out and I’m watching “The Biggest Loser.” That’s changed a wee little bit.

But what has stayed the same is some of those slogans that are on the walls of the gyms. “Pain is weakness leaving the body.” I remember seeing that way back when. I see that today on television. I suppose it makes sense in a certain way of thinking. It helps you get through the pain because you are thinking about how weakness is leaving and if weakness leaves, I suppose something else has to come in and fill the void of weakness being gone. Which, of course, you are hoping is strength, right? That’s the slogan on the other side of the gym. “No pain; no gain.” Twenty-five years ago they were on the walls. Twenty-five years later they are still on the same walls because there is some truth in what is said.

The letter that James wrote wasn’t written on gym walls, but I suppose that whole idea of “no pain, no gain” is kind of what the Holy Spirit is having James talk about. He’s writing to people that have been spread out, chased from their homes because of persecution. They are suffering. They are enduring trials and testing of their faith and they are saying, “How come so much pain God? I’m not liking the pain.” So James writes and part of his purpose is to tell them the blessing, the gain that comes as weakness leaves our faith and strength and maturity replaces it.

What he says to us is one of those things that we often see in Scripture, where things are turned upside down. You know how Jesus said, “Blessed are those who weep” and “The first shall be last.” Here he says, “Consider it pure joy when you suffer trials or pain because you are blessed. Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial or under pain.” He is telling us blessing and joy are ours as we go through this difficulty and these trials as we rely not on ourselves but on our faith. Which means we are relying on our God.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Things are a lot different from when James first wrote this letter in the 1st Century, right? James did not use an iPad

to compose any of the letter that he sent to those that were spread out, but the same kind of trials and the same kind of temptations and the same kind of difficulties are there because sin was there then and sin is there now. And because we live in a fallen world, we are going to find a lot of things in our life that are painful. The pain we bring on ourselves because we sin. We think we know better than God. God says, "Don't do that" and we do it. "Don't have an affair." We go and have it. We know better than God. Yet it brings difficulties. "Don't misuse God's gifts." Drugs and alcohol, we know better. We are going to go do it, and it brings consequences. "Don't steal." We decide we know better, and it brings consequences. Some of the trials and temptations we face come because of our own sins.

But some come just because we live in a sinful world, not that we have done anything that God is punishing us for, but because we live in a sinful world. We have the pain and the heartache of relationships. The pain and the heartache of financial challenges. The pain and the heartache of watching other people that we love struggle and suffer. We are going to face this day after day after day. This should be no surprise to us. God has never told us that when we become a Christian, we will now have everything be smooth sailing and roses. He's pretty clear that if you are going to follow Jesus, you are going to have to pick up the cross and follow him. It's going to come with suffering.

That's why James writes to remind them of that truth that they are going to face suffering but they are never going to face it alone. That's why he can say to consider it pure joy when you face trials because the reaction that our God is looking for from us under these trials is to strengthen us. Like steel is tempered by heat, we are strengthened in our faith as we face these difficulties when we look to God. But if we think we are going to handle it all on our own, we are going to pull ourselves up by the bootstraps and we are going to fix everything ourselves, then we aren't going to get that blessing and that joy that our God has waiting for us as we rely more on him and his love for us.

But that's how we are, isn't it? We always think we're going to fix everything ourselves. If only I make the right decision next time, then I'll have everything go smoothly. Or if I find the right doctor. Or if I find the right solution to this or that. I'm going to fix it. I'm going to do it. Sin makes us so self centered and so foolish we think we actually can fix everything. Sometimes it's only when God uses these difficulties to knock us on our backside that it leads us to plead to God, "God help me. I can't do it!" That's when we rely more on our God, and that's when he strengthens us.

Notice how James immediately goes into talking about prayer. He says how we can approach God confidently because God is not going to find fault. "If any of you lacks anything, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault." I know myself. I know some of you. You know yourself better than I would know you. You know there are plenty of faults God could find in us, right? We're filthy wretched sinners. We might keep ourselves from doing certain things, but we sure think about them often enough.

But God isn't there waiting to punish us because we sin against him. He already punished our sins when he sent Christ to live in our place perfectly and then to take all of our sins to the cross. So he is not eager to find fault for us like we often are in each other and with other people or with others who are over us. He's not sitting there just waiting to point out our flaws. He's waiting for us to, in our time of difficulty, come to him. He is going to say to us, "I love you. I died for you. You are my own child. Of course I'm going to help you get through this."

But then as we pray in the middle of this difficulty, he really points us to having faith, to believe and not doubt, not to approach God as a source of strength and think "I better cover all my bases." Or to think "I'm going to show up in church this Sunday so God makes my life go better this next week." That's being doubled minded. That's thinking that God is going to do something because we are going to manipulate him or trick him into doing something for us or that he owes us. Faith says, "God owes me nothing but God, in his grace, has promised me everything. He's promised me the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. He's promised to be with me and help me and sustain me. He's promised to give me strength as I face this difficulty." So when you pray, he tells us to believe that God will do it. Don't just wish it. Pray it and believe it. If you are going to pray to God for rain, start carrying an umbrella. Believe he's going to do what you ask for; that's what he is saying.

If you are saying, "God, I'm facing this difficulty. I need strength. I can't do it on my own. I am weak. I am frail. I am worthless spiritually before you. Lord, I need your strength." If that's what you are praying for, start carrying the umbrella of getting into the Word and the Sacraments. That's where God is going to answer that prayer for strength as you dig deeper into his Word and read his promises and see what he says and see what he has done. Then in those times when you feel like what we sang in Psalm 142, "Look around me to the left and to the right, no one is concerned for me," you'll start noticing God is concerned for you and he's there to help you. You'll have that kind of trust in God's power to deliver you from all kinds of difficulty.

Go back to your very Baptism. Through a splash of water and the Word of God connected with it, God killed your sinful nature. He took away the guilt of your sin and created in you the gift of faith. When you come to the Lord's altar, through wine and wafer the Lord gives you his very body and blood. That's how deep his concern and his love is for you, that he comes to you in this unique special way to say to you, "You are my child. You are forgiven. I love you. And I'm going to help you and strengthen you."

In trial, when we go to the answer God points us to, his Word and Sacraments, God strengthens our faith. Then we have joy. We have this blessing. Not that everything is always going to be happy, happy, giddy, giddy, but we have confidence that even when I'm at the bottom of that pit and I can't hardly see the light at the top anymore because I'm so down, I'm so frustrated, I can turn to the promise that God loves me and has forgiven me. That gives me confidence that this pit or this hole I'm in is not going to last forever.

To show us the truth of that statement, the Holy Spirit has James use another illustration that turns everything upside down from how we think about it. "Those brothers among you who are poor should take pride in their high position" he says. "But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position." That's another statement that just sounds upside down and backwards to us. But this is what takes faith. It's not going by what our eyes see. It's going by what God promises. The one who is poor in this world but still has the Savior has the greatest treasure of all. He has the forgiveness of sins and eternal life and the promise of God's presence, comfort, strength and protection. That gives us joy and blessing in the middle of hardship.

He says to the brother who is rich though, "take pride in your low position." Don't take pride in your wealth, because your wealth is going to be here and gone. It can fade away. It can be destroyed just as you are amassing it. But take pride in your low position that you are humble before God, who loves you and who has saved you. Then you will find blessing and joy that is yours.

Who among us does not want to wake up tomorrow with greater confidence in our God and greater trust in our God? Who among us does not want to face the difficulties this next week will bring without that knowledge that my God loves me and nothing can take that away from me? That kind of blessing and that kind of joy is yours. Just immerse yourself in it, and the Word and the Sacraments.