

Sunday October 4, 2020 message
by Kim Woody
James 5:7-20
“What are you waiting for?": Patience and Prayer

Good morning, Grandview Family. It means so much to me to be here with you this morning and to get to share some thoughts from my time meditating on this book and specifically this passage. And you know what? I'm probably going to try to say too much (and in some places I won't say enough). There's so much here and I feel like I could burst. So I trust that the Spirit is at work and speaking today, and you, like me, will be blessed and challenged in whatever way is needed, and I hope that we will go on to have more conversations together about what we've learned here long after this service ends.

There's not a lot of time, so I'm going to do such a quick recap your head might spin. Luckily, we're recording this, so you can go back and listen again as many times as you want! Here we go. Let's briefly recap this letter so that we can go into its conclusion with the full context in mind.

AUDIENCE: The letter of James was written to “the 12 tribes scattered among the nations.” Of course that's a Jewish reference. Jewish converts to Christianity, separated by distance but connected by the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

AUTHOR: You may recall that James is widely considered by scholars to be the brother of Jesus, and according to most accounts, James was martyred (thrown from the pinnacle of the temple then stoned to death for not renouncing Jesus). James was also known for the thick calluses on his knees because of how much he prayed.

THEME(S): What point/s did James try to communicate to his audience? Jodi helpfully told us last week, “James is asking: If we really believe the good news of Jesus, what kind of life would we live? And what kind of community would be formed in our midst?” As I did a few rereads of this book, I was struck by the emphasis on the wholeheartedness of faith. James tells us don't be double-minded; true faith will produce “faith fruit”; cannot have faith without actions or vice versa. And this wholehearted faith is not just about the individual...it's about the community. And in such a tenuous time of being scattered into small groups, with so many forces outside them bearing down, protecting the integrity of the community must have felt more important than ever.

So that brings us to the letter's conclusion. Which is a curious one. On every reread, I get to this section and it feels like suddenly, after a steady stream of "dos and don'ts", and a blistering pace, it's almost like James hits the brakes and slows everything down.

We get to 5:7.....and James says "Be patient." It's this that I want to focus on today. And more than patience, I want to get to the heart of what is implied in that word: *waiting*. Why do we wait? How do we wait well? What are we waiting for?

Why do we wait?

I don't think it's a random decision for patience to be put at the end of this letter. If you're being patient for something to happen, then you're waiting. And if you're waiting *well*, you're waiting in trust and expectation. Right? Because you can wait for something and not be patient. Can I get an amen, parents? "Are we there yet??" "When is it over??" "Can I open my presents tonight?!"

James gives us three examples of patient, perseverant waiting. He talks about the farmer (someone cultivating fruit), who waits for harvest time. James talks about the prophets who endured persecution and persevered. Much like farmers, they planted seeds (of the words of the Lord) and awaited the harvest of fruit (the repentance and restoration of God's people). And, of course, most of them never got to see the harvest of that fruit. James gives the third example of Job, someone who persevered in waiting to hear from God. These three examples all have one important thing in common: *They cannot bring about the results they have worked for and long for. They must wait for God to act.*

Why do we wait? We wait because we are not in control. Faith without works is dead because if something is planted it should bear fruit. Likewise works without faith are dead, because then we would be acting in such a way that assumes we are the ones that bring about the final product! That any fruit comes simply because we planted the seed. Do we control the laws of physics? Or the weather? Or the migration of insects? Or time? No. To plant, to persevere, to *wait* in hope and expectation is to have true faith, "being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see."

And as a side note, this highlights the amazing partnership we have with God. We must play our part: tend the soil, plant the seed, prune, and harvest. But God is ultimately the doer of all the invisible things done in the darkness of the earth.

How do we wait well? (Waiting in faith means waiting together.)

James moves on from patience quickly into prayer. Again, I don't think this is random, like he was trying to fit all the extras in at the end. Prayer is also faith in action. It is an active posture toward God, and it requires faith. Because like the farmer who knows that she can plant a seed but can't make it grow, we who pray know that we can go to God and pour our hearts out and ask for what we need, but it is God who gives it.

There is so much that could be said about this section, but for our time in it today, I want to focus on the piece about sickness and healing.

How do we wait well? I submit that the answer is: We wait *together*.

Anyone who has struggled with sickness of any kind—mentally, emotionally, physically—or who has journeyed with someone in that, knows the agony of waiting. Waiting for a diagnosis. Waiting for treatment. Waiting to finally feel better. Waiting for the end. For those of you who don't know, I am a spiritual health practitioner at St. Paul's Hospital downtown. In the old days, I would have been called a hospital chaplain. My job is to attend to the spiritual and emotional health of patients. And ever since the pandemic started, there are a lot of people waiting in their hospital beds alone. The changes to visitation policies have meant that only certain people can come visit at very particular times. I encounter patients at some of their most dire moments, and a lot of the time they have to carry it alone. So much of the time they are waiting. Of course, being who I am, I make the corny joke "Well, they call you a patient for a reason!" ☺ I usually get a chuckle and on occasion the hearty laugh. Sometimes bad jokes at the right moment can serve a good purpose. But for a time, I try to share their burden with them. Sit with them. Pray with them. Wait with them. So many of you have done and are doing the same for others in our community in their hardest moments.

James tells us that if any of us is in trouble or sick or has sin in our lives, we cannot carry that alone. We must help each other, and we must go to God with it in patient, and expectant, prayer. The author Rachel Held Evans in her book *Searching for Sunday* makes a helpful distinction between "curing" and "healing", and I think it speaks well here. She says:

The thing about healing, as opposed to curing, is that it is relational. It takes time. It is inefficient, like a meandering river. Rarely does healing follow a straight or well-lit path. Rarely does it conform to our expectations or

resolve in a timely manner. Walking with someone through grief, or through the process of reconciliation, [or through illness] requires patience, presence, and a willingness to wander, to take the scenic route.

Brené Brown said it this way: “I went to church thinking it would be like an epidural, that it would take the pain away . . . But church isn’t like an epidural; it’s like a midwife . . . I thought faith would say, ‘I’ll take away the pain and discomfort’, but what it ended up saying was, ‘I’ll sit with you in it.’”

This is some of the most important work of God’s church: to say to those who are waiting, “We will wait with you, and we will pray. We will have faith *for* you.” Prayer is a focused attention of our expectant waiting. It is a distinct sign of our faith. James knew this. He knew that in community, prayer is crucial for all kinds of healing. And I think he knew that waiting in faith is easier when we do it together.

What are we waiting for? (In other words, *Who* is our faith in?)

Finally, the last question: What are we waiting for? Or in other words, *who* is our faith in?

Waiting is hard. It will push you to your limits until you think you’re going to fall off the edge of yourself. There isn’t a single one of us who has escaped this difficult reality, because it is simply part of being human. Our current *global* situation, which has intensely *personal* ramifications, has many of us crying out the words of the Psalmist, “How long, O Lord?”

What’s the point of waiting if we don’t trust that what we’re waiting for is good? Or actually coming at all? What’s the point in waiting if God is not good?

If we go back up to verses 7 and 8, it says: “Be patient, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming. . . . Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.”

The word for “be patient” could be translated “to be of long spirit”. To live this walk toward God, to wait for the day of the Lord, requires what Eugene Peterson called “a long obedience in the same direction.” Another writer described faith as “one long alleluia sung into a dark night...”

But let us remember, my dear friends, the One who accomplishes things in the dark. Our faith is in the God who takes a seed buried in the earth, or in our hearts, and causes it to grow deep roots and to bear fruit. Our faith is in the God who takes

a dead man buried behind a stone and raises him to new life. In the God who will make all things new. So no matter the darkness, no matter the forces that bear down on us and seek to distract us from what is true, we know that God will finish, fulfill, and complete the work that he started. We know the end of the story. And we can wait in hope.

Throughout the Bible we are told to wait for the Lord. And as James concludes his letter to this scattered people, he implores them to wait expectantly, in faith, together. That is my call to us, Grandview.

What are we waiting for? Who is our faith in? I'll leave you with these words from Isaiah.

Isaiah 40:28-31: "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. But those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

Amen.