

Genesis 22:9-14, James 1:1-4
“With friends like these...”

I think Lent is my favorite season. Advent tends to be much more festive and a celebration while Lent gives us the opportunity for contemplation and spiritual growth in a much deeper way. This past Wednesday our Ash Wednesday service was significant and it marked the beginning of our journey together through Lent. Today, we begin a journey together through the book of James. James which is a powerful, yet as we will find, controversial book in the Bible.

Suffering and testing and trials have been at the center of lent for centuries. Today we will find suffering and testing and trials at the center of both of our Scriptures. Both Scriptures show God as an integral part of allowing our testing, even so far in our Genesis Scripture, as creating a time of testing.

With friends like these, with a God who encourages our suffering, who needs enemies? It is a natural response, but it is wrong. Today, we will attempt to understand James’ approach as to why God allows suffering.

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It is key to understand and give the background to James to understand the context of this book of the Bible. Especially this Sunday as we begin the sermon series we are going to spend a little more time on background and context than we normally would because it will affect every other teaching on James here on out. Today is a key day for the rest of the James series. I had mentioned that there was some controversy surrounding James. It was the last book in the New Testament to be consistently included in the Bible. Martin Luther called it an Epistle of straw because it contains nothing evangelical. In the entire book Jesus is only mentioned twice and one of those times is in our reading today.

There are 108 verses in the entire book and 60 commands are found within those verses. That’s a huge number. This week at the lunch bunch someone had done their homework and said reading through James felt a lot like reading Proverbs. It could be called the Proverbs of the New Testament. There are varying theories as to who wrote James because there are a number of James’ mentioned in Scripture. The one that I have settled on is the brother of Jesus is the one who wrote this book. And as a result it is one of the earliest books of the Bible that was written except maybe Mark.

So who is this James mentioned in Scripture? We find him referred to in Mark 6:3 as the brother of Jesus with Joseph and Mary as his parents. Remember, this is the same family who at

the time, James included, in Mark 3:21 went out to seize him to take him home because big brother had lost it, he had lost his mind. But something changes with James, and I think it is the result of I Corinthians 15:7 where Paul tells us that when Jesus was raised from the dead that he appeared to James. And his name is mentioned, only his name and Peter's. This is significant because even though he wasn't one of the 12 disciples, he was the brother of our Savior. And, our Savior chose to appear to him, who was outside of that inner discipleship circle.

From there this James becomes not just a believer but the leader in the church. In fact in Galatians 2:9 James is listed with Peter and John as "acknowledged pillars of the church." Here is someone who went from skeptic to chosen to pillar of the church. Even so far as we find him in Acts 15 at the Jerusalem council he is the one who hands down the judgment on what the apostles had decided on the matter. It was from this that we understand the author of James, who was the brother of our Savior and knew him intimately, he has clear vision for what it means to do the will of God.

That's pretty much all of the background we are going to give, there is so much more we could share on this, all of which is important for what follows, but in order to be faithful to my calling we have to look at Scripture itself. There was once a young pastor who was struggling in his ministry because he felt like he was not patient with the people, that he needed wisdom and experience to handle the situations that he faced so he went to his mentor, a wise retired pastor, and said will you pray for me, that I will have patience. So the pastor prayed: Lord, I pray that you will fill the life of this pastor with every difficult situation imaginable. "Fill his days with contention and strife, put people in his life who are divisive and where their only agenda is for themselves. Don't allow him any time away from trials and fill his journey with temptation." Well, the pastor had heard enough and he tapped the wise pastor on the shoulder and said: I asked you to pray that I would have patience. The mentor answered, God does not give patience, he gives us experiences that build up and strengthen patience. If you don't walk through it, you will never have it.

With friends and mentors like these, who needs enemies, right? But that is exactly the line of reasoning that our Scripture lays before us today. No one wants trials in their life, no one asks to be tested, no one seeks out suffering, but it comes. Everyone wants patience and faith refined by fire, but without the fire. In our Genesis Scripture we find ourselves at the conclusion of the most seminal testing of Abraham. Make no mistake, God initiates and carries out this

entire experience. Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son, his only son, or at least the heir of the covenant. No explanation is given why, just do it. And he does it, he raises his knife in order to plunge it into his heart when God stops him and says in vs. 12: “Now I know that you fear God. You passed the test. But just as important who else knew that Abraham feared God and knew that Abraham was willing to do anything God asked him? That’s right, Isaac. Do you think Isaac would ever forget that experience?”

But while he, or they, were going through this most tragic and difficult time in their life, they were not enjoying it. No one wants to go through suffering. Not even our Savior who knew the reason for the suffering and understood its purpose. As he sweats drops of blood he cries out in Luke 22:42, Father, take this cup from me. Doesn’t sound like real excitement for the suffering he was going through or that he faced and was coming up.

But the reality that we face is that suffering is a part of all of our lives. Why does God allow it? Look at vs. 3 where it states testing of your faith produces endurance. That word testing in the Greek is *peirasmos* and it is the same word used in the Greek to describe a fledgling bird testing its wings. Have you ever watched a baby bird learning to fly? It ain’t pretty. We used to visit Stacy’s family in the summer and they had a beautiful view overlooking the Puget Sound. There was a lone tall tree and there on top of it was a bald eagle’s nest. Every year we would watch the baby eagles learn to fly. One year a baby eagle did a kamikaze nose dive in the dirt right in front of the deck. He got up, shook himself off, and tried again.

Testing your wings is never easy, but we know that we serve and love a God whose tests are not meant to make us fall, but rather to make us soar. The tests are not meant to defeat us, but to be defeated. These tests are not meant to make us weaker, but stronger. God wants us to overcome, gives us what we need to overcome. An athlete has to endure pain in their training or else they won’t get as much out of it as they could. You’ve got to love it.

Verse 2 of this Scripture tells us that as we face suffering we should consider it joy. Why, because we know the results...the other side of our suffering will produce fruit. Why does God allow us to suffer, why does our friend our father, as we heard on Ash Wednesday, why did the Father send the Holy Spirit to take Jesus out into the wilderness for 40 days of fasting and then an encounter with Satan? Because he knew Jesus would prevail.

We will face suffering, but we will not all prevail because we will not all turn to our Savior in that suffering. You see, how we go through the suffering is about as important as the

maturity gained from the suffering. It is not simply the ability to bear things, it is the ability to turn them to greatness and glory. The thing which amazed the unbelievers in the centuries of persecutions was that the martyrs did not die grimly, they died singing. In fact we find Paul and Silas singing in prison in Acts 16:25, you find Christians writing letters and books in prison that will inspire the generations to come.

Even Paul in Romans 5:3-5 tells us. This is a direct parallel of James 1:4. Our friend allows us to suffer so that we can be mature. A mature Christian knows that once Christ becomes Lord of their life then their existence will become harder for him in every respect that it would be if he lived for himself, but at the same time it will be richer, more beautiful, and happier. It will become instead of mere living, a real experience of life.

God knew that Abraham loved him because he showed his maturity in the test. This Lenten season let's ask how does our friend, our Father know that we love him? Amen.