

Sermon, December 18, 2022

James 5:7-12

“ Hope in the Midst of Suffering”

The Letter of James was addressed to a people who were suffering greatly. The early church at that time was greatly misunderstood by some, and the Roman government saw it as a rising threat to its power. As a result, the church became the object of severe persecution leading many of its members facing torture and death. If you look at the beginning of chapter five you'll see that James also placed a lot of the blame on the wealthy and their exploitation of the poor who made up a large percentage of the early church. For example, in verse 5:4, James addresses the wealthy, saying, “Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts”. A statement that has relevance even today when considering the struggle for fair wages for the working class - not to mention in a world where a handful of billionaires control as much wealth as the poorest half of the world.

Today, due to such factors as conflict, natural disasters, climate change, and pandemic, poverty and hunger are on the rise on a global scale, and in the words of António Guterres , Secretary General of the UN, “Unless we bridge the yawning chasm between the global haves and have- nots, we are setting ourselves up for a eight billion strong world filled with tensions and mistrust, crisis and conflict”. All of this can only lead to greater suffering in the world, both here and abroad.

And though we in this country do not face the religious persecution that the early church did, it still exists in other parts of the world, China being a prime example. I, myself, have twice testified in Federal Court on behalf of Chinese persons seeking asylum in this country due to persecutions they faced in their native land because of their commitment to the church of Jesus Christ.

Of course , human suffering exists not only in global ways, but within individual lives. Not only because of poverty and hunger, but severe illness, the loss of loved ones, loneliness, depression, addiction - the list goes on and on. Like it or not, suffering is a part of life, but there are ways to rise above it.

One of the great preachers of the 20th century, Henry Emerson Fosdick, once said, “ If anybody asks me to explain suffering, I say I can't. I say I have a power that can surmount it.”

That may not be the definitive answer, but it is more satisfying. No one has ever adequately answered the question of why there is evil and suffering in the world created by a loving God, not any more than we can definitively describe the nature of God. We simply recognize the reality that tragedy is a part of life. But through experience we also know that there is the capacity to rise above it, and that we find that empowerment in the Lord our God! After all, isn't that what the story of Christmas is all about, that one has come into the world to show us a better way, And the Passion of Christ is filled with misery and pain, but the story ends with an empty tomb and resurrection , as well as followers who find hope and New Life! As King David wrote in the 30th Psalm, "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning."

In this morning's reading James advises his people to " Be patient...until the coming of the Lord". But listen carefully to what he says in verse 8, "You also must be patient, Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near." Again, Notice the words, "the coming of the Lord is near". You see, in the earliest years of the church the people were absolutely convinced that Jesus was returning in their lifetime. But that was two thousand years ago, and might it not be fair to say that our patience wears thin? I hate to disagree with James, but is that really what Jesus had in mind?

I might argue that it is true that the coming of the Lord is near, or "at hand", but not in the sense that Jesus is going to come flying in on a cloud and make all things right; but, instead, in the realization that through faith the spirit of Jesus resides in our hearts, in our minds, and in our souls, giving us the ways and means to make things better. In the Gospel of Matthew, when an angel appears to Joseph to tell him it is alright for him to take Mary as his wife, it says, "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel." Which means, "God is with us". I do not believe that means God that God was here in the time of Jesus and will return at some point in the future, but that God is with us now, today and in all the days to follow. Does not the Risen Jesus Christ say to his disciples at the very end of Matthew, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Suffering and pain are a part of life, and will remain so for as long as the world exists, but we do not have to bear it alone, and if enter into partnership with the God WHO IS WITH US, and follow the lead of his Son, we can find ways to alleviate much unnecessary pain in the world, which gives us not only hope, but even in life's darkest hours, the joy that comes in the light of the morning! Amen.

**Let us pray:** Lord God, we are grateful that you know and understand what we must sometimes endure in this life and that you do not leave us alone. We are grateful for the gift of your Son Jesus who embodied for us a different way of life - a life grounded in love and compassion, a life oriented towards peace and justice, a life centered in you, and aimed towards the alleviation of suffering in the world. As we celebrate his birth, help us also to honor his sacrifice by striving to live our lives as he lived his. Amen.