

Oregon City United Methodist Church
18955 S. South End Road
Oregon City, OR 97045

Rev. Michael Benischek
503-522-9807
July 26, 2015

Series: James

Sermon: James, Chapter 4

James 4:7-10, 13-17

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.

Sermon:

The Bible says we are a mist. Our life is passing brief and fleeting. Job said, "My life is but a breath." (Job 7:7). King David echoed, "Each man's life is but a breath." (Ps 39:5). The prophet Isaiah strongly warns us, "Stop trusting in mortals who have but a breath in their nostrils. Of what account are they?" It's important for each of us to learn this lesson and keep it close to heart. When I was growing up, I was blessed to know half of my great grandparents. Some kids hardly know their grandparents, but I got lucky. But what this meant was that I witnessed a generation pass away during some formative years of my life. Around the age of 12 to 13, our family went to funeral after funeral as we said our goodbyes to great grandparents, great aunts and uncles and so on. And in high school, we said goodbye to a sophomore classmate who was hit and killed by a drunk driver. I learned early on that life is fleeting. It also didn't help that my family also mowed the Malcolm Cemetery, a biweekly reminder of our ultimate destiny. You want to freak a kid out? Make him mow the cemetery by himself at the age of 11 and forget about him until after nightfall. Just you and your imagination. As we go through this existence, where is our journey's end? As we go through this pilgrimage of life, where is it heading? Are we just passing through? And if so, to what? I remember when I went through Confirmation years ago, meeting in the basement of the old Malcolm Methodist church up on the hill. And at Confirmation I remember thinking, I'm finally through! It's done. Journey's end! I'm finished! But the faith journey is only just beginning. To know about your faith is not the end result. To know the 10 commandments and Apostle's Creed, and Psalm 23 and the Lord's Prayer and whatever else you learn at this church or another is not the point of walking with the Lord. We might teach you religious facts and belief statements and creeds and doctrinal standards and scripture and church history and saints who have gone before - you might learn all these things, but that is a beginning point - not the finish line. We are on a journey, and this is not the journey's end.

Two weeks ago, I mentioned that I cannot get the Nebraska out of me. And a good meaning church member quipped afterwards, "It's called the Oregon Trail for a reason." State flags have been in the news recently, and maybe it's time to change the Nebraska Flag, have a look. From it's beginning, Nebraska has been a place of journey. Our most famous landmark, Chimney Rock, was seen by people traveling through. The name Nebraska means flat water, water that starts in other states, crosses through and dumps out the other side. Water that passes through. What do we see on that flag? A river with a steamboat. People passing through. A railroad. People passing through. A guy hitting a horseshoe on an anvil, shoeing horses - people passing through. The farming scene, crops ready for market somewhere else, passing through. Matter of fact, the only thing that is staying put is a lowly little cabin. To top it off, the massive horizon, the backdrop of our own

Nebraska flag, it mountains. There are no mountains in Nebraska. They are the mountains of Colorado and Wyoming - the next stage of their journey, where many of these early travelers were going. Way to go, Nebraska, a place where people pass through on their way to somewhere else. They are on a journey, and they're not at the journey's end. I am still excited to be in Oregon City, the end of the trail, but the beginning of a new life

James, the writer of James, reminds us that we are on a journey. The first thing we learn is that counting on the future is folly. This is considered by James to be a sin—the sin of presumption. What is the business plan of your life? Is it like verse 13, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.”? Yet so many people today plan out and map out the business plan of their lives counting on the future instead of counting on God. They say, “we’ll go...to this university, to this conference, to this neighborhood...we’ll accomplish this and achieve that... we’ll make money and see continuous growth of our assets.” They don’t say a word about God, it’s just we, me and me. How many of us are scared to open up our investment statements? The Dow goes up, the Dow goes down. Real estate goes up, real estate goes down, prices will always go up. No better illustration exists of James’ principle: to count on the future is folly.

There is a second principle to be found in James: That ignorance of the future is a matter of fact. As he puts it in verse 14, “You do not even know what will happen tomorrow.” I remember some books that I read in the 1980's. One book, written in the 70's detailed in assured tones that America was unsustainable and within ten-15 years—that is by 1990—the American experiment in democratic capitalism would be collapsed and gone and the Russians would rule. Another book related how in painstaking demographic and scientific detail that the world’s food producers and economic systems were heading for a collapse that would result in wide spread famine and devastating loss of life by 1990. Huh. Well, we’re still here. Even today you hear of such gloom and doom. You better hoard gold. We continue to make fools of ourselves when we do not accept two great certainties: 1) only God knows the future and 2) we do not. And we actually benefit from this ignorance. For if you knew that rough times were coming for you tomorrow it might well spoil the enjoyment of today’s blessings. If you knew that great blessings awaited you tomorrow you might just refuse to shoulder your burdens today. The uncertainty of life is what enables us to keep us vigilant, diligent and appreciative of what we have in the present. Ultimately of course we who believe in Christ know our future is eternal life in heaven but we know neither the day nor the hour and we are most alive when we accept the uncertainty of our day to day existence in this world.

Sounds like a bleak message. You are only a midst, a breath if you will in the grand scheme of life. Don’t count on the future, and you don’t know what the future holds. We’re only passing through. But James does give us some practical advice and a little bit of hope. A third principle from James is that recognizing God’s part in the future is the beginning of wisdom about the future. In verse 15, “Instead you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will...’” This is how all true Christians think about the future. We believe in providence; that there is a divine will that governs things. We do not understand it. We cannot explain it but ultimately we trust that the future is in God’s hands. As the hymn writer put it, “This is my Father’s world and though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.” We know the future is full of uncertainty and surprise. We also know by faith the God who holds the future. We don’t know the future very well but we have detailed knowledge of the One who controls it. In the end, our analysis should be: Trust God and submit to him. I love the second to last paragraph in James 4, it is filled with so many verbs. Submit to God, resist the devil, come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands of sin, purify your hearts, humble yourself and he will lift you up. We are passing through this life on a journey, and our journey’s end will be when he calls us home. My goal in church is not to teach you about God, but for all of us to grow a personal relationship with him no matter where your journey takes you. And we are all on this journey together. Young and old, pastor/parisher, saint and sinner. Knowing that we do not know where our future paths will take us or how long a journey we have left, let us go forth with holy boldness, knowing that God will lead the way. Amen.