

Sermon 09.19.21
Proper 20 - Year B
James 3:13-4:3,7-8a Mark 9:30-37

I don't know about you, but I'm really tired. It's not the general kind of tired that comes from too little sleep or too much work or the fatigue that can follow exercise or physical labor. I'm mentally worn out. Exhausted from far too many months of COVID - dealing with the danger the virus poses to the health of the community, being disconnected from each other in ways designed to protect our physical well-being but aren't particularly helpful for our emotional health, having to make too many decisions at home, at work, and here at church about the best way to respond to the seemingly endless changes in how the virus is impacting our community. I'm wearied by the continued stress that I see in far too many people, and I know I feel myself. This worry and stress is so often manifesting itself in arguments and discord as we all struggle with the frustration of trying to find the best way to get past this time of pandemic, frequently feeling hostility or disappointment in the actions of other people, writing them off as selfish or ignorant or foolish when they don't make the choices we think are best. We are all tired of talking about COVID, of wearing masks, and of having to weigh the risks before just about any gathering.

It also seems like we are living in a perpetual state of limbo - waiting for a better time when these problems will be gone and we can get back to doing all of the things we want to do. There is a response I've heard so many times in the last year and a half, and I know I've used myself often, when someone asks, "How are you doing?" the response is, "I'm hanging in there." Hanging in there. That's not what any of us want for our days. Hanging in there is surviving - but only surviving. We all want much more than that - for ourselves and for everyone around us. Implicit in that response is the acknowledgement that there are struggles and there is disappointment that things are not any better. In "hanging in there," however, there is also the presence of a bit of hope that at some point the holding on will lead to something else, a life that is more full and more vibrant than what we are experiencing now, if we can just hang on. But how are we ever going to get there? What can we do that we haven't done up to this point that will move us out of the limbo of anxiety and conflict and into the fullness and joy of abundant life?

Jesus spends a large amount of his earthly ministry addressing the fear and anxiety of the people who surround and follow him as he offers the promise of peace and abundant life. What often occurs, however, is that those who hear him, his disciples included, don't hear what they want to hear - most often because the people are focused on very different

things than Jesus is. In our Gospel story this morning, Jesus is traveling with his disciples and teaching them along the way. What he tells them is the core of the Good News of Jesus - that he will be killed and will rise again. The disciples, who have left their homes and families to follow Jesus, are characterized as not understanding what Jesus says. Their confusion, to me, appears very reasonable - what Jesus describes is an uncomfortable and impossible chain of events. Betrayal and death, coupled with the far-fetched promise of life after that death can't be what the disciples expected when they followed Jesus' call. The way the disciples react in fear and silence to the news of Jesus' coming death and resurrection, however, is something that seems destructive, leading the disciples to arguments among themselves about greatness, which they probably think they understand and what they most likely wanted Jesus to promise to them. They pass up the opportunity to gain more understanding about the future that Jesus describes, choosing instead to bicker about self-serving matters.

Once the group arrives in Capernaum and Jesus asks the disciples what they have been arguing about along the journey, it is obvious from their silence the disciples aren't particularly proud of their participation in the greatness argument - despite having spent much time and energy on the topic. Jesus responds to their silence by basically telling them that

they are worried about the wrong thing (again). Greatness, at least the kind that the disciples want, isn't what they should focus on. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." This is certainly not the kind of greatness that the disciples understand and desire. I'm sure the greatness that filled their debate was all about power, prestige, and respect - certainly not servanthood and being last. The disciples' priorities, and the priorities of many others who hear Jesus, are so different from what Jesus says they should be, which is, I think, why Jesus' words are often met with tension, hostility, and confusion. Jesus offers an alternative to so much of what is considered to be important and desirable - not just in the society in which Jesus' earthly life occurs but in our current world as well.

What do we prioritize? What do we worry about? What drives our arguments with each other? Do we, like the disciples, prefer to ignore the uncomfortable, seemingly impossible words of Jesus and instead focus our energy and attention in other ways - fighting for some other definitions of greatness because they make more sense to us, seem to be more practical, or are more in line with what we understand will make us safer and less anxious?

Anyone who has attended Christian church services or has read scripture with any frequency has taken part in the remembrance of the death and resurrection of Jesus in a multitude of ways. As with anything that is familiar, there is a danger of the loss of meaning - forgetting exactly what is powerful and important about what we know. When we hear Jesus speak of his betrayal, his death, and his resurrection, have we heard these words so many times that we forget the magnitude of those words? We follow a crucified and risen Jesus, which is terrible and impossible and glorious - all at the same. We profess our faith in that resurrected Lord, Jesus Christ, whose kingdom will have no end. This alone challenges so much of what we think we know about the way the world works.

But as Jesus followers, it is our challenge not only be to comforted and consoled by this belief but also to be prepared to listen to Jesus' words, to ask questions when we don't understand, and, when our own priorities and concerns stray from what Jesus teaches, to be willing to let go of what we think we know is important to take hold of those things that Jesus promises will bring true peace and abundant life. This is a constant challenge because the pull of those "earthly things" is powerful. We are anxious about the things happening to us and to those we love, and the worries we have are very often based on real uncertainty and danger. Building defenses and protecting who and what we value from whatever

potential threats we identify can become all-consuming, taking up our time and energy as we fight.

I expect that each and every one of us struggles with listening to understand Jesus and with making choices that prioritize what Jesus teaches us is important rather than what the world or our own self-protection might emphasize. There is some guidance to be found in how to do this in our lesson from James this morning. For several weeks now, we have read from James, and during this season his words have particularly resonated, I think. James has advocated as a follower of Jesus for the importance of caring for the welfare of all neighbors. He has warned about the power that words can have to harm others. He has encouraged being ready to listen and slow to anger. James has challenged those who follow Jesus to be not merely hearers of the Word but to be doers of the Word. These are all areas where the noise and pressure of all that is going on around us make it difficult to live into these expectations.

Today, James speaks on what wisdom looks like when that wisdom comes from God and is not weighed down by the expectations of the world. Instead of envy and selfishness, ambition and conflict that result in brokenness, James characterizes the wisdom that comes from above as pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. When life is lived giving priority to

these concerns, says James, “a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.” These are the kinds of traits that should be driving our decisions and influencing our actions, no matter how much the noise around us clamors for us to choose differently.

As we continue to navigate the uncertainty and upheaval of this present time, I will continue to pray the words of our collect this morning - praying that rather than being caught up in anxiety about earthly things, the things that are passing away, we instead can love those heavenly things, those things that endure - remembering our faith in our resurrected savior Jesus Christ. And to help us with that, I believe that once again James has given us good advice for how we can do this. “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and (God) will draw near to you.”