

truly matter in life. Our family, our comfort and our stuff. Jesus says, think again. How do you come into this world? Naked. How are you going from this world into the kingdom of God? Naked.

The third verse of the hymn “Rock of Ages” gets it right.  
Nothing in my hands I bring,  
Simply to Thy cross I cling;  
Naked, come to Thee for dress,  
Helpless, look to Thee for grace:  
Foul, I to the fountain fly,  
Wash me, Savior, or I die.

Why do we struggle with this so much? Why will so many hear this message and say, well, then I’m out? Because it’s a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God. So much of our efforts of the western church over the last few generations has been designed to say that what goes on here isn’t really that important. At best, our faith is a nice little topping on your carefully crafted life. It won’t ask much of you, you won’t have to change very much, you can carry on as you are.

But when God makes demands like these and we are forced to reckon with our own neediness, our own depravity, and our own limitations. The holy trinity of the good life – family, comfort and stuff can’t give us what we want most. We need God for that.

The modern world naturally turns us in on ourselves. But our pursuits for happiness from within always results in just more anxiety, fear and selfishness. We need something from outside us. We need something to bear the weight of our neediness.

What’s the antidote? How do we find true contentment? We need a saviour. We need a God, who we couldn’t have thought up on our own, to reach into our lives and turn us not inward but outward.

We need a God who says, yes, your family is lovely, your own leisure pursuits are nice, and your stuff is amazing. Now, let it all

go – because I have something more for you. His name is Jesus and he will fill your deepest voids, meet your greatest needs and give you your life’s greatest purpose.

And if you do, the world will look at you, happy in a way they never thought truly possible, and say, “There’s something about these people.”

“I walked away because the demands seemed to great...but look at them now. They are living like all that other stuff didn’t really matter as much as we all thought it did. Maybe discipleship is truly worth the cost. Maybe discipleship is worth everything.”

Thanks be to God, Amen.

## “Faith Works: Perseverance”

June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2024 — Selby United Church — Scripture: James 1:1-18

By Rev. Mike Putnam

This morning we’re beginning this small book of the Bible because it has an urgently important and practical message for each and every one of us. James is wrestling with the relationship between our faith and our living.

How do the things you believe about Jesus Christ, God and the Holy Spirit put themselves to work in your everyday life? James is imminently practical – this is not systematic theology. James is dealing with the kinds of stuff that you and I deal with every single day.

In fact, I’d say that based on my own pastoral experience, this book hits each one of us where it hurts. Like a good doctor James is going to poke and prod and image our tender spots over the next nine weeks and he’s going to reveal and diagnose our spiritual maladies.

But on a very high level, James is going to cause us to make the connection between our faith and our actions. James mentions faith 14 times in 5 chapters and James gives us 59 different commands in 108 verses. For every three verses there is another imperative. He’s not only going to diagnose our spiritual problems but he’s going to give us spiritual prescriptions for addressing them.

People tend to like the book of James because it is so packed with good advice – quotable lines. But there’s no shortage of good advice in the world today. You want advice? Go watch a YouTube video or read a book. But James is different. James is going to diagnose and treat us based not on the secular wisdom of the moment, but with the Word of God.

And that’s a different thing all together. Because when we come to understand who we really are, and who God really is, and how our ordinary life’s challenges are met by a God who saves us – it’s going to make your life better and it’s going to make you better at life.

And so, this morning James wades right into the deep end. He’s not starting off easy and working his way toward the hard stuff. No, he’s launching this letter with the biggest problem that each one of us face in our everyday lives. Every human being faces trials. Trials are not something that only happens to the unlucky. Trials are

something that come to each of us, in every season of life, in every time and place.

Not sure that’s true? Listen to this summary of life – it’s a tad long but it makes the point:

A high school senior lives in tension. He is, at long last, king of the hill, the privileged one, and yet classes are long and boring, homework is baneful. At home he faces curfews and chores. He looks around and asks, is this what I’ve been waiting for all my life? There must be more. I’m tired of school, tired of books, tired of teachers, dirty looks. I’m tired of my room, my mom, my activities. I can’t wait to get out on my own to do a thousand new things. When graduation comes, then my trials will be over.

So our young man goes to college, he is free, but he’s a chemistry major perpetually in the lab and working part time to cover his expenses. By his senior year, he has a serious girlfriend. They begin to think about marriage. They haven’t been together long enough to be sure, when he gets a job in Dallas, 800 miles away from his sweetheart who will be teaching third grade. Absence makes their hearts grow fonder. They work harder than ever to master their new professions, but they are lonely and tired of kissing their telephones goodnight.

They decide to marry. Gazing into each other’s eyes, they say, we will be together forever. Soon our trials will be over.

The honeymoon comes and goes. They set up house in a small apartment. On his first day of work, he showers and starts to shave, but he can hardly see himself because the stockings draped over the mirror are blocking his view. And how she spends money. Shockingly, she still expects him to demonstrate his love with flowers and dates.

He thinks, what do you mean you want tokens of love? I married you. Why do you need tokens? Of course, he causes a few trials too. At the table he eats as if he were back at the fraternity. When he sleeps, he thrashes about their bed as if he is re-enacting an Olympic decathlon. Eventually, they sort things out. That trial is over. Now they want a baby, but one year, then two years go by without success.

And then just as they prepare to meet with the physicians, she conceives. They say, now

our trials are over. I will not recount the trials of pregnancy, the nausea and mood swings. Let us travel forward for eight months. They have a healthy girl. Mother and daughter leave the hospital and spend their first night at home. The baby is asleep and the parents lie in bed thinking, our marriage is strong, our baby is home, at least our trials are over. They drift off to sleep.

In an instant they're awake. The baby is crying. Why? She's dry, she's not hungry. She's crying for no reason whatsoever. So, the trials of parenthood begin.

In every stage of a child's life, parents tell themselves the next phase will be easier. When we can sleep through the night, when the baby can understand us and we can understand her, when we are done with diapers, then it will be easier.

When they are old enough to go to school so mother can have a little peace and quiet, when they become more independent, when they can drive so we no longer spend endless hours chauffeuring them to soccer games and clarinet lessons, yes, when they can drive, then our trials will be over.

When they go to college and can stop fussing about curfews and we can stop wondering where they are, they may never come in, but at least we won't know, then our trials will be over.

Work is no different. Trials never end. Things never settle down. If the economy is thriving, the company is growing and our work is respected. There is too much to do though. The trials are over work and exhaustion. If the economy is cool, or there is not enough business, then income is down and jobs are in jeopardy.

Trials continue after retirement. We miss the camaraderie, the respect, the friendships at work. We have too much time on our hands. Health issues surface, and we may wonder if we laid aside enough money to fund the next twenty years.

From our childhood home to the retirement home, trials are a constant companion. And so, this morning James wants to talk to you about your life's trials. And he says, "Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

"Count it all joy." That's a strange piece of advice. I'm not sure what you're going to do with that. Because joy is not something that feels natural

when the stuff hits the fan. That's not at all instinctive when the news turns out to be bad. Because someone who shows up in the midst of the tears and emotions and says, "Be joyful" is pretty likely to get an earful – or a punch in the head!

But see, James tells us that when the chips are down, when things are not going well, when we're in the midst of a time of trial the key to getting through is to count differently. We need to learn a biblical and divine mathematics.

But notice what he's not doing. He's not urging us to harness the power of positive or wishful thinking. He's not telling us to just deny reality or to assume things are going to all work out in our favor. That's unrealistic. What he is saying is that we need to engage in a biblical form of counting. We're to keep our eye on the heavenly bottom line always and forever!

What does he mean by this? Well, Biblical counting means we see the parts in light of the whole. We ask, "What does all this add up to in God's plan and design?" James wants us to look at our trials and wonder what is God's doing in it?

See, the issue is that we believe in an omniscient and all-powerful God. We believe in a God who is present with us – he doesn't go on holiday and things kinda fall apart until next Wednesday when he's back. No, God has accounted for all of this, he's in the midst of it, and He's not caught off guard. But he's also taking into account the great sweep of history and all of his eternal promises and all of his divine intentions in this moment of trial.

And he's already determined – "predestined" – that this trial is going to be useful. Through it, God means to do something to us, for us, in us and through us.

But see, that's hard, isn't it? Because we're working from our own game plan. And we're not amused when that plan takes a sudden right turn. We're not impressed when our plans get derailed.

And when that happens, there's grief. We grieve the loss of what was or could have been. And grief work is often not what we think it is. It's not just being sad. Those who grieve – whether it's a death or the death of a dream are tossed into a murky emotional soup. People who grieve get angry, they get sad, they try to bargain their way back to the old reality, they try to deny the reality such as it is. And round and round we go until in the fullness of time we are able to accept what is and find hope

in what could yet be, until finally our minds settle into a new reality.

And James' advice this morning isn't going to make our grief go away. Whenever there is a sudden and unwanted change of plan, whenever there is a trial along the way, grief is part of the deal. But this morning James wants you to be crystal clear – if God allowed it, he's not stumped by it, and he's going to do something through it.

And then, when we are able to account for our trials in the divine economy – when we learn to count differently – we can say, "I don't like this, it's not how I wanted it to be, but I'm going to put it in my ledger as a win, because I know it's being used by God to do something that is ultimately good."

What good can possibly come from a period of trial? Well, if we think about it, we know that all kinds of good comes from it. You know, over the last year or so I've gotten into weight training. I'm trying to build big muscles. But I've learned that muscle grows through pain. When I lift a heavy weight and lift it over and over again it actually tears the microscopic muscle fibers. It aches. Sometimes it even keeps me awake at night.

But if I do this over and over again – if I tear those little muscle fibers over and over again, I've learned that it builds strength and the tearing results in building. The saying "no pain, no gain" is absolutely true!

And so, God allows trials in our lives for all kinds of reasons. We can look at the text and see that trials make us grow in His likeness (vs. 3-4), trials give us wisdom (vs. 5), trials humble us (vs. 9-11) and perhaps most importantly trials cause us to trust, lean on, and embrace God in a way that prosperity never can.

But the bottom line is that trials are part of how God accomplishes his purposes in the world. Hebrews says, "fix your eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

See, God was doing something through Christ's ultimate trial. And Christ kept his eye on the goal – the salvation of the world through the forgiveness of sins.

So, the ultimate goal in our times of trial is to prove our faith, polish God's graces and to cause our faith to shine in us. James says we must face trials, "So that you may be perfect, and complete and lacking nothing" (James 1:4). And for that reason, we can count it pure joy!

But there's one trial that needs special attention. And so, James transitions from our times of trial to our times of temptation. He writes, "When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."

Temptations are an ever-present problem in our human experience. Our temptations fully realized in the form of action will often become our greatest source of suffering. Temptations followed by action can hurt, destroy, breakdown and even lead to spiritual death.

And so, James wants us to know that even in the midst of temptations God is at work. He's not creating them – God only operates out of good not evil – but knowing our tendencies toward that which is not good – God sets to work to accomplish something even through our greatest failures.

And so James wants us to understand the "temptation cycle." Temptations can overrun us in a moment, but James says the first line of defence is to know the predictable cycle that they take. And the temptation cycle almost always follows five stages:

1. Deception – the tempter seeks to deceive us by convincing us that our moral failures are no big deal and we can't really trust God to just give us what we need. That's what the serpent told Adam and Eve and that's the same thing he whispers to us.
2. Attraction – James says, "...but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed." We are attracted to something – and the evil one's tackle box is full of things that catch our eye, promise us good things and draw us away. But within us is a fallen nature and our fallen nature is convinced that we can find the good life by collecting lures.
3. Preoccupation – once lured we're in real trouble. That which was external to us now becomes internal and we can't back our way out. What was once an attraction of the eye becomes an attraction of the heart.
4. Conception – "Then after desire has conceived...", James says. When temptation meets an opportunity there can be conception and then the temptation takes on a life of its own.
5. Subjection – Now our whole self gets caught up in the sin. James says, "it gives birth to sin and sin,

when it is full-grown gives birth to death.” The cycle of temptation becomes a cycle of sin which morphs into a cycle of tragedy and things start to die.

James wants us to know the cycle of temptation as our first line of defence, but it’s not our only defence. Which is good, because if knowing how sin comes to us is all we’ve got, we’re still in trouble. Our desires are too strong. Our justifications too convincing. Our self-delusions too complete.

You might say, “I’d never fall for that. Only bad people do things like that.” But I assure you that under the right circumstances, at the right time, and in the right way we will all fall victim to some of the most devastating sins imaginable. None of us is immune and none of us is strong enough to avoid all temptation all the time.

And so, James gives us two more practical spiritual tools to deal with our temptations. And the first is this: James says, “Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of heavenly lights, who does not change like the shifting shadows.”

How does this help us in our times of temptation? Because God’s goodness is unchangeable. We can rest in God’s unrelenting goodness toward us. And that means that what is, is not an accident but it is providence. And what we believe about God becomes the foundation of our actions in life. Do you see that? What you believe about the nature of the universe is going to affect how you live day to day. Are you being given good gifts or must you grasp at the things you desire, because if you don’t no one else will?

But that’s why it’s so essential that we know that God is good. How do we know that God is good? Well, because Jesus was good. And Jesus is the full revelation of who God is – delivered to us in a form we can relate to, communicate with and understand. God is good and unchangeable and every good gift has come from him on purpose, for a purpose, for his glory.

What you lack is not an accident, or an opportunity, but it’s part of God’s providential plan.

Second, God gives us the transforming power of the new birth. James says, “He chose to give us birth through the word of truth that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created.”

The evil one wants you to believe that you are weak. He wants you to think there’s no hope. He wants you to think that God can’t be

trusted to give you what you need.

But God’s promise is this: He has made you part of his new creation – A creation that will be fulfilled by the resurrecting power of God in a new world without sin, suffering or death. Our salvation is a function of God’s providential action and his unrelenting desire to save us. It’s not a function of us mustering up enough will power to save ourselves.

And if you desire to be part of that new creation, if you desire to be clothed in righteousness, if you desire to be saved because you know salvation is outside your skill set, it’s probably a sign that you are experiencing the new birth.

Like a baby, you know you are helpless and need of care. And in time, through trial and temptation we will grow into maturity as citizens of the new world. But in the meantime, we need to be guided, directed and corrected by God who is recreating us slowly and surely.

Every life will face these two things – trials and temptations. None of us in the room this morning is exempt or gets a pass. Trials and temptations could well be our downfall at most, or our biggest source of pain at least.

But this morning James wants us to count differently. He wants us to get out our spreadsheets and move the trials and the temptations from the debit side to the credit side.

Trials and temptations are a highly effective tool God uses to prepare us to be citizens of heaven. They’re part of how he is softening us, crafting us, molding us into people who are fit for life in the Kingdom of God.

James says, “Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.”

James wants you to be armed with the life giving, life transforming, and life altering knowledge – so that you may understand and count it all pure joy.

Thanks be to God, Amen.