

Sermon “Sermons!”
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Kirk of St James
Sunday September 29, 2024

We all have things we do in our lives that are so second nature we might not even process that we do them. Perhaps it is routines, walks, etc. all matter of things can become second nature to us. Every morning in our household one of the first things that happens is our coffee machine is turned on. Perhaps you drive the same route to work and barely think about it. Well, a few weeks ago as I was writing my sermon, I realized that I have never explained the process that I follow, and I wondered if that might be interesting to know. Each week you come, and I deliver a sermon but much like a duck swimming on a pond there is a lot that goes on behind the scenes each week. So, I am inviting you into the process this morning to give you an idea of what it looks like. Over the last almost eleven years you have had to listen to me preach roughly five hundred sermons, and over six hundred thousand words and this is what generally guides me through.

One of the first places to start is trying to understand the historical background of the book we are reading, and what its context means for our understanding. There are a few reasons one would start here but the first is that by reading the writings in their original context it then helps us with interpretation. For example, we have been reading the book of James over the past few weeks. The book of James is rich, complex, intriguing, and difficult to categorize. “James plays a critical role in the canon of Christian Scripture offering a unique perspective upon earliest Christianity. It voices concern for whole-hearted devotion to God, just treatment of the poor and vulnerable, and significantly the teachings of Jesus.” While that is all true there are various opinions of what type of writing James is—could it be “a pastoral homily, community exhortation, diatribe (characterized by direct address, imaginary interlocutors, and rhetorical

questions,) or paraenesis (traditionally defined as communication of traditional moral teaching lacking any coherent structure).” Others argue that James could be a loose collection of essays similar to a style used in Greco-Roman writing that used an opening and closing much like a personal letter yet was written with the intention that it be copied and shared. While there are different opinions James functions as a letter, and an epistle which was a letter written for a large audience. James can also be categorized as wisdom literature which communicates practical insight and instruction in the conduct of life, much like the book of Proverbs.

After we have a general background of the book it is then helpful to see who the audience is and the context, they are hearing it in. For example, is it a time of war or peace? Is there ongoing persecution? Are people hearing this from a place of fear or anxiety? Those things are important to understand. What concerns are the writer trying to address? For the book of James, it has been “plausibly argued that the reference to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad” may be a literal address to members of the people of Israel living outside of Palestine.” Using clues from scripture this address was most likely meant for Christian Jews, living scattered among nations, that there was disparity between the rich and the poor, and that they were experiencing hardship.

One area I will digress this morning is a personal quirk of mine—I like seeing how history and our biblical history overlap. So, what other writers at the time were making references to the things we read about in the bible, what archeological evidence has been found etc. For example, the two oldest Greek papyri with excerpts of James date to the late second or early third century. There is speculation that the writer James was the brother of Jesus, and both Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius refer to James the brother of Jesus, also known as James the Just. Not to mention that fairly recently an ossuary has come to light bearing the inscription,

“James, Son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” An ossuary is a bone box, which was used for reburial. According to Jewish customs the deceased was buried the day of death, mourned for seven days, and then a year later the bones were dug up and placed in an ossuary. If this is actually the ossuary of James, then we also have confirmation that the language Jesus most likely spoke was Aramaic. An ossuary is another great example of how understanding the original context helps us interpret scripture. You might remember that in the gospels someone wants to follow Jesus but says, “first let me go bury my father” and Jesus replies “let the dead bury their own dead.” What appears at first to be a harsh answer, is actually not denying him the burial of his father, but rather placing the bones in an ossuary that other family members can do.

Now we know that there is discussion around what type of writing the book of James is considered, there is some consensus around the audience being Christian Jews, that there was a disparity between the rich and the poor, and they were facing some type of difficulty. Understanding these things hopefully helps us avoid proof texting. Proof texting happens we choose to read scripture in a way it was not meant to, in order to support a point, we want to make. For example, using proof texting some have argued that women should not have leadership roles in a church. It allows us to pick the passages we want but discard the ones that might challenge our reading of something in a particular way. In order to faithfully read scripture, we need to read and understand it as a whole, and that is not always easy.

From there it becomes a process of trying to interpret scripture as closely as we can both for the ancient context and also what it means for us today. In our reading today we see James’s admonishing people for envy, self ambition, and a lack of wisdom. He encourages them to think about what they are doing, and what God wants them to do—wisdom from above verses wisdom from below. For James “wisdom is not in the head but in the behaviour. It is a way of life, not a

way of thinking or believing.” Incidentally, it is around this point that I believe Martin Luther takes issue with James and therefore called it the “strawy epistle.” Martin Luther felt that James was negating the teaching of Paul. Paul said that we are saved by grace and not by works. Luther felt that James was trying to make the argument that it is what we do that saves us. The truth is I do not believe that is what James was saying—in fact in many ways they were both right. Paul is right, we are saved through faith—through God’s love and mercy, not through anything that we do. At the same time, if we are truly Christians and followers of the way then what we say and do matters, which is what James was getting at. We cannot be followers of God, and then spew hatred. We can’t be followers of God and then enforce division.

Again, this is where context helps. Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, “If the James who wrote this letter is the same James who led the church in Jerusalem after his brother Jesus’ death, then Luke gives us evidence that he practiced what he preached. When Paul and Barnabus came before the apostles and elders in Jerusalem to defend their unorthodox mission to the Gentiles, it was James who invented a way for that mission to continue (Acts 15:12-21). When Paul’s ministry continued to provoke some believers in Jerusalem, James was among those who came up with a way for Paul to demonstrate his regard for Torah (Acts 21:17-26).” James dealt with a lot of conflict and division and witnessed what it did to people and the church. It is no wonder he encouraged unity.

One of the last things that guides me in my sermon writing is a quote from Karl Barth who once said something to effect that you should write with your bible in one hand, and a newspaper in the other. We do all the work of background context, audience, exegesis, and that leaves the question of what it means for us today. What do these ancient teachings mean in our lives? When we are standing in our kitchen, or at our desk at work, or even in line at the grocery

store what is James saying to us, in our current context? How do we act out wisdom the way James encourages? How do we let go of division and celebrate unity? How do we ask God for the things that matter most? That is where our lives, our faith, and the world around us comes together.

