

“In the Aftermath of Helene” based on James 5, Mark 9:38-42

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on October 6, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

In the month of September, we had five Sundays and five chapters of James to go through. It fit so well. James has had many warnings against committing sin for the sake of power, even if the power you seek seems to be for a righteous purpose. If we had this service last week, here we would have talked about the restraints placed on the Scottish people, as battles over religion undergirded the story of the tartans.

We would have talked also about how these wars of religion have also driven many people away from God. We'd have focused on the need for perspective, the need for patience and perseverance, the importance of being truthful about sin, and living out our faith earnestly, so that others might see, and believe with us in unity.

But then, Hurricane Helene. And suddenly the text rings differently. The impact of Hurricane Helene has been heartbreaking and devastating. Hundreds of people have been killed. Hundreds are still missing. Thousands more injured, not to mention all the property damage. Whole towns like Chimney Rock were just washed away – gone. People throughout our region lost everything they had. Pets are lost. Keepsakes and sentimental items are gone. Washed away forever, as our neighbors in Western North Carolina still suffer without clean water, reliable food, shelter, and clean clothing.

My heart cries out to God, “Why? Why Lord? Why did so many have to die in this way? Why was so much taken? Why do hurricanes and natural disasters even exist?” We wrestle with a God whom we say is all loving, all powerful, and all knowing, and yet, where is the love in this storm? Could God have stopped it? Was God shocked by this or surprised? Did it come out of the blue?

What's more, there are then miracle stories being passed around – people who were spared and saved. Why did God swoop in to save these people and not someone else, or all of us? Why does one die, and yet another one lives? Does that mean that some may have deserved what happened to them? Was this divine retribution going on here? It's all so difficult to understand.

Was it the power of prayer that saved some and not others? Were not our prayers that the hurricane would lose strength worthy of consideration by God? If you're asking questions like this, it's perfectly normal and sanctioned by scripture. It's called lament.

Sometimes, being told that God's ways are higher than ours, as Isaiah and Job say, may help some. Yet, this feels like God patronizing us, “Take care little child, someday you'll know.” Even though I know it's true that God is balancing so much more than just us here at Shelby Presbyterian, and a lot more than Western North Carolina, our state or our nation. God is in charge of sustaining all of creation and life – A place I would not want to be.

Seriously, I get it. I'm glad that I am not God. But some things? I mean, don't some things seem obvious? No hurricanes? What good comes of such devastation? Such loss of life?

In our James reading, the start of this chapter is often ignored and overlooked. It's hard for us in the most prosperous and abundant nation in the world to hear. But in truth, perhaps we need to hear it more than ever right now. James writes, “Come now, you who have abundance wail loudly,

lamenting over hardships that are coming upon you.” The King James says, “Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you.”

As we’ve noted before in this series, when James speaks of the “rich,” it’s not purely wealth. He is not speaking of people who have large bank accounts, as banks did not exist then. In the ancient world, the rich were those who owned land and had some status. This was not a capitalist world, but one in which the aristocracy had means to do things. The vast majority of people who would have heard this letter initially would have been living in what we would consider abject poverty, living day to day, depending on any day’s wage to meet that day’s needs.

James offers a warning to any of us who have enough right now to sustain ourselves, meaning any of us who have a level of abundance that affords the ability to throw out leftovers, or to replace, rather than repair items of small significance in our lives. The truth is we all live in abundance, yet wail loudly, weeping over what we do not have.

We howl and lament over hardships or miseries that we see coming at us. We anticipate those hardships that have not yet come. The truth is that our abundance is corrupted or rotted, and our clothing – how we present ourselves to the world – is not the fine clothing that we think it is. Rather, it is moth eaten as well.

We may be tempted to complain that our internet is still out, or our power took forever to come back on, or that this storm has delayed our goal to fix this or that, or even that insurance will take much longer than we want to fix our home. But the truth is that if we can say any of this – we are living in abundance. There are others who are far worse off and need our help.

I say this not to make you feel guilty. I say this not to discount the struggles you or any of us are going through. The struggles we deal with – even the ones I listed – they are real. It is frustrating and emotionally tiresome to wait and have our lives disrupted. But James tells us to be patient, to wait on the Lord, refraining from groaning against each other, keeping from judging one another, as we persevere in hardship. This applies whether it can be discounted as a “first-world problem” or if it is debilitating.

James, as always, is practical. He warns that the poison of financial gain is a witness or testimony against us. Often this is translated as “rust,” but it is actually the word for poison in Greek. It’s very clear here that James is saying the rust or corrosion on precious metal is a poison to us, because the need for more and the desire to add to what we have will eat our flesh like fire.

That’s why he says that if you don’t pay someone fairly, God hears their cries. Luxury and self-indulgence only fatten our hearts for slaughter. These are hard, harsh words. James challenges us as readers.

Once again, as he has done throughout the letter, he brings up murder again. Likely, again he is speaking to those Zealots ready to kill for God. He says you have condemned and murdered the just, or the just one, possibly a reference to Jesus, who did not resist evil at his crucifixion. It could also mean the innocent people killed when zealotry goes wild.

Regardless, it is clear that James has some high and difficult standards. In a time when we need comfort, as the early church did, it feels a lot like piling on. You might wonder why I didn’t just cut the first half of the chapter and go on. But I read the first chapter because James brings it back, and

speaks comfort. James tells us to be patient, to not judge one another. We all face trials differently. Jesus is the judge who stands before the doors – none of us have to take that role. This is not meant to judge anyone as rich and therefore in trouble. It is meant to help us see the truth of putting God first.

We can look to the prophets, who heard from God and spoke for God, yet they suffered evil, or misery, and they persevered, and were blessed, or brought near to God, made large. Here is the center – the crux – quite literally of the letter. we might miss it if we aren't keyed in. So, I'll share a few translations:

KJV: “[You] have seen the end of the Lord, that the Lord is very pitiful and tender of mercy.”

NRSV: “You have seen the outcome that the Lord brought about, for the Lord is compassionate and merciful.”

NIV: “[You] have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.”

Our translation today: “You have seen the ends of the Lord, because the Lord is full of compassion and deep pity.”

This is at the heart of answering our doubts, our fears, and our questions about God. It's true that I can't know why God does things this way. Sure, Isaiah is right to say God's ways are higher than our ways. The book of Job is right when God says, “Were you there when I started all of this.

But for some reason because of our disobedience, suffering and struggle get worse and compound. But, the Lord is full of compassion, as in sharing in suffering. Literally, the word in Greek is about a pain in his gut – and has a deep pity or mercy – again another word for a physical feeling. It's not a mistake, or happenstance of language, that these words get applied to God. These are God's feelings toward us.

The good news or gospel is not that God swept in and saved the day and all is ok now. The good news is that God came down to share in our humanity, to suffer with us and endure pain. The Father sent the Son out of love for the world, out of compassion and mercy, to endure the limits of our human lives, redeeming all that we are. This brings us from being image bearers of God to become children of God through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. By his ascension, we are given a downpayment of the life to come, which is the Holy Spirit to live in and among us, empowering us to be like Jesus,

Beloved, James's next words often get used to bolster the “power of prayer,” as if prayer's power comes from us and can be used to get us what we want. On the contrary, James is pointing to prayer as a means to connect with God. He wants us to recognize God in our misery by praying, in our joy by singing praise, in our sickness, by seeking wholeness and healing. Faithful prayer saves the weary, but notice it is the Lord who lifts us and raises us to new life in him.

The truth is that our God is present to us, not distant. Our God is not our magician to give us what we want when we want it. God is not a plot device to swoop in at the end of the movie and make everything right. No, as much as we want those things, there are reasons I've never understood as to why God has for some reason called out to us to change this world through us. God has entrusted us, as limited human beings, to share in the God's work. No, God does not assign the task like a boss

who is distant and hands out orders. Actually, God came into this world to be one of us, and by the Spirit remains with us, empowering us to do the work that is needed.

I am frustrated with God when I look out and see the misery and pain of Hurricane Helene. I am frustrated when I hear how many lives were lost, and livelihoods destroyed. I do sometimes wish Jesus would just come back tonight and fix everything. But he hasn't and he won't – not tonight – yet he is with us in the Spirit. The Son of God who suffered for us, remains Emmanuel, God with us.

So then, as worker, or co-laborers in this good news, empowered by the Holy Spirit. What then are we to do? What are the great works we can do to help this world? In our gospel, the disciples tried to forbid casting out of demons in Jesus' name because the ones doing it weren't part of their group. Instead, Jesus says, "Do not forbid them. For there is no one who will do a work of power in my name and will then be able to readily speak evil of me."

What is a work of power? It's casting out demons. Sure. It's also just giving a cup of water. Not hurting children should be an easy one for us to do and it is a work of power in Jesus's name. Not making our faith look bad in the world by our actions we do in the name of God is a work of power.

James in closing his letter says that if someone wanders from the truth, meaning that if someone wanders away from faith in God, faith in Jesus and the Spirit, and we bring them back – then the millstone isn't needed after all – because returning a sinner from wandering away will not only save that sinner, but cover a multitude of sins for the one who helps. This is not about specific sins, but allegiance to God, and our tendency to wander away from God in sin.

The one who recovers the wanderer is not necessarily sinless, since it makes no sense to have a multitude of sins covered. Rather, the truth is that God is with us in the misery and pain. God does not shy away from it. We need to be with each other in the misery and pain as well. Our God is a suffering God and from our suffering, we can help others. We can help to find, rediscover, and remain in the truth of God's presence with us.

Life is hard. Life is difficult. But life is also beautiful, because here's the thing that is good news: We saw the Holy Spirit at work this week in and through the neighbors who helped neighbors. We saw the Spirit in and through the generosity of individuals and organizations who are giving time, effort, supplies, and financial gifts to relief efforts. We have seen people step up, and churches, like ours getting involved the ways we can to help. Some did extra meals. Others are doing supply drives.

So, as we go forward, I will never have an answer as to why God does it this way, but I will take comfort, and urge you to do so as well, in this simple truth: The same God who created us, became one of us, and suffered with us. The same God who brought order to the world, resides in and among us, helping us to bring order in the chaos as well. The same God in whom we receive our name and identity has called us to be a part of repairing this world.

Take heart. Let's ignore the temptations to cry about the things we don't have and the social media posts of comparisons and conspiracy theories. Let's stay away from that. It only serves to drive people away from the good news of God's love. Let us love one another and do our part, whatever small part it is – a cup of water or casting out a demon – it doesn't matter. We do our part to love one another and reveal the Spirit's presence in and among us. Amen.