

Advent: Third Sunday

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[0:00] See how the farmer waits for the precious food of the earth, being patient about it until it receives the early and late rains.

! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This past April, the world watched in horror as the cathedral at Notre Dame was consumed with fire.

I think for many it seemed like an apt metaphor for Christianity over the last two millennia. And that which seemed so grand and beautiful, seemingly gone and fire.

Yet, last Sunday, our dear brother, Father Lawrence McElrath, worshipped there in that location.

Not to brag, but he also preached from this pulpit a few months ago, too.

So, that's, I think, the kind of caliber that Trinity has been spoiled by of late. But, the grandeur and beauty was never meant for the here and now.

[1:31] That was always meant to point the heart of the worshipper to the glory and beauty of that which was yet to come. The Lord, our God, is a God of order.

He's not a God of chaos or confusion. Yet, I'll admit, as we look back at our own personal histories or around the current state of our lives, we often are confused by his work in the life of man.

So, we come to our assigned lectionary reading in James, and, as a matter of fact, every one of the lectionary readings. Here in Advent 2019, it is quite remarkable to see how this parish's theme of stewardship dominates the assigned lectionary readings.

And, you might ask, how is that? I don't remember seeing anything about giving within the readings that we had today. Well, the call we received over and over again was that we were called to let go of our own expectations, and to let God work His perfect will, while still recognizing on that other side of the same coin, that in the here and now, the pain and the suffering we see and experience in the world today, makes that difficult for us to do.

There is an obvious tension here. Otherwise, James would not have had to address the problem within his congregation that he is addressing in his epistle.

[3:09] So, we are faced with a choice. Do we work in the here and now for ourselves, for our own desires, for our own needs, for our own wants, for our own expectations about how our lives, and the lives of the church, and the lives of our family, and the lives of the world is going to play out in our lifetimes?

Or, do we wholly commit ourselves to the eternal promise given to us by Christ? And therein lies the principle of stewardship.

Unfortunately, in our day, we have diminished this principle to the area of money and finances. Yet, the Bible makes clear that all we are, all of our time, all of our passions, all of our belongings, are a currency.

It is limited in supply and to be devoted in worship to the God who created us. For who is the best steward?

A steward is one who manages the belongings of another, and the greatest stewards recognize that all that they are and manage belong to their master. Yet, if we look, and I invite you to take out your Bibles and look at James 5, looking at the verses that surround today's reading of James, we see the destructive nature of those whose concerns are for themselves in this lifetime.

[4:52] There is one rich and extremely popular preacher who made a lot of money out of a book and goes on and on and on about living your best life now.

But James has a few things to say about those who devote themselves to living their best life now. In James 5, he writes, Come now, you rich.

Weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and your silver have corroded, and the corrosion will be

evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire.

You have laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields which you kept back by fraud are crying out against you. And the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

You have lived on the earth in luxury and self-indulgence. Now, there are two schools of thoughts about who James has in mind in this passage.

[6:07] There are either unbelievers being spoken of here in James 5 or it is believers being spoken of in James 5. And there's good men that come down on both sides of the argument.

I personally lean towards there being two classes of rich mentioned in the James. I believe if you look back at chapter 2, there are Christians who struggle with the sin of partiality.

I believe those are rich believers who struggle in this area of discernment. I'm kind of saying that nice, but I believe there are Christians who struggle with a particular area of sin. James is rebuking them, calling them to repentance.

But I believe that there is a different group being spoken of here in James 5. Because the rich man being mentioned here, there's some clues. These people have no concern for Christ, zero concern for Christ.

That doesn't sound like a Christian to me. And then in verse 1 of chapter 5, we see them waiting for misery yet to come. That is not the characteristic of a Christian.

[7:13] And in verse 6, we see that they oppress and persecute the righteous, and the righteous are being referred to as a separate group. So I believe that James here is speaking about an unbelieving, non-Christian, rich man who follow the course of the world.

In other words, I believe these are unsaved, unregenerate individuals whose persecution of believers and the poor around them is evident. But James isn't just writing this as some sort of manual for the congregation to withstand the oppression of the rich.

Rather, he's holding them up as an example. The rich man here is almost a grace for us. It's an instruction that God gives.

It is what I would classify as a negative example. Being held up to show believers don't act this way. They are everything that we are called not to be.

And James points out a logical problem that a spiritual eye sees that these rich men are not only greedy, they are foolish. Foolish because this kind of conduct, this way of patterning your life, this way of setting your heart upon the riches of the here and now, that has consequences.

[8:42] As we read and as James warns further down, you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. Now, this is a particularly important verse for me.

It's a sweet verse for a steal. Especially my brother and my father who raise cattle and understand what James is being spoken of here. The fattened heart speaks to preparation for the day of slaughter.

My parents, my dad and my brother have this flock of, flock, not a flock, you can tell I'm not the farmer in the family, a herd of Angus beef.

They've got some special lineage and the big deal is that they are grass fed beef. my brother will be fond if you go out with him and have a steak, he'll tell you about the steak you're eating for an extended period of time.

Probably, and I hope he doesn't listen to this recording, pass what your interest is in listening to it. But he'll point out there's a big thing when you buy beef. They'll say, corn-fed, grass-finished.

[10:01] He's like, that's cheating because his are grass-fed from the manger to the chopping block. But that idea of grass-finishing has this idea of you kind of give whatever you need to get this sustained through the end until you prepare them for slaughter.

And then the animals are given a, in the time, short time leading up to slaughter, they're given all these delicacies. You guys know what I'm talking about, the idea of finishing a herd of cattle.

If you look at, I was looking, I like beef, I'm sorry, I like beef, and I like looking at these weird things. The most expensive cut of beef is wagyu, is that how you pronounce it?

W-A-G-Y-U, Japanese beef. It's a big deal, they're finished with olives, so they're fattened briefly towards the end of their life and slaughter, for their slaughter.

Another big thing is acorn-finished pigs are supposed to be a delicacy. At the end of their life, they just eat these things they love, love, love. In fact, the best time in a slaughtered animal's life is the month or so before they're killed.

[11:23] I actually printed out, and I'll spare you, every once in a while I'll print out a long extended scree in the middle of my sermon, but I have a long, you can see here, it's like half a page text from a study.

There's a current methodology of finishing being developed by leading universities in Poland. I'll spare you the technical language. It's here if you want to read it afterwards, but speaking about a new way to address Poland's decreasing meat supply by a technical way of finishing the animal. And this kind of intentional planning and breeding with an eye to the day of slaughter was not lost on James readers, on the farmers during the day that James wrote.

They might not have had universities or ag departments to analyze and figure out the best way to prepare an animal for the day of slaughter, but they were just as cunning.

They planned out the same way. Their time was set by it. And here is James' real point. The farmer knows about preparation for the day of slaughter.

[12:37] The person who sits down and eats the animal knows about the preparation for the day of slaughter. But it is only the stupid, rich bow or cow who does not realize it is being prepared.

For the day of destruction. That bull and cow that are getting prepared for the slaughter buck think that they are having their best life now.

They've made it. That for the first time in their life they're eating everything that they want. And what the farmer is really doing is trying to prepare that meat to be marbled in the right way. The heart grows fat.

The organs grow fat. And you get that ribboning in the beef that is so desired for. Sometimes as believers we feel like the seven ugly cows that were in Joseph's prophecy dream.

Remember that dream where there were seven fat cows, seven fat, desirous cows, and then seven skinny cows come up out of the Nile and eat the seven fat cows? Sometimes we feel like those skinny cattle.

[13:46] We look at verse seven in our reading today in James and we see an important promise that is also missed by us modern readers on a quick reading.

James gives us an insight to a great spiritual mystery when he writes, Be patient therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord.

This is the attitude of our hearts as we face the lean years of suffering here on earth. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it until he receives the early and late rains.

That concept of early and late rains is something that it is hard for us to relate to. It's especially hard because we're here in upstate New York and our seasons are completely different.

When we went to, when Ray and I went to Israel, it would have been almost two years ago now, Ray got there about a week before me and he got to experience something that was very rare and that was, were we there in June or July?

[15:04] June. And it poured down rain. That was the week before I came. And it was the first time in a long time, like years and years and years that they had that kind of rainfall in June.

The land of Israel needs water at specific times in order to have any kind of agricultural system. It's part of the promises made in the Old Testament we'll look at in a moment. What Ray observed was something that hardly ever, ever happens. What usually happens is that through the summer there is no rain, no notable precipitation, and the land becomes hard, very, very hard, hard like a rock.

And their seasons are a little different over there. If I were to talk to you about the early rains, you'd think about April showers bringing May flowers. Well, we kind of have it reversed there. For the time of planning would be late fall, autumn, about now.

time. And what was required was the early rains. Those are called the yorah.

[16:25] There's two rains, the yorah, the early rain, the malkash, the late rain. The early rain is a rain that comes at late fall, and it is absolutely necessary for there to be any kind of agricultural, especially during the times of scripture.

Because the only way that they could plant was to plow or use what's called a seed drill. You can't even get a plow into the ground during summer.

It's impossible. You can't even get the plow in the ground. So what was necessary was the early rain. The early rain comes, and it softens the ground, and then the farmer can go out and plow the field and plant it with seed.

If there is no early rain, there is no crop to put in the ground. And the late rain comes around actually the time of Passover.

We're pretty familiar with this even as Christians if you think about it, because the late rains come and they, in a sense, actually finish the crop in the same way that we talked about cattle being finished.

[17:33] But in that, late rain comes and provides the greenness and what's needed for the time of harvest. And we're familiar with this harvest because we celebrate, right, the Feast of Pentecost, which is the Feast of Firstfruits, which is the first harvest brought in, which is where the seed will be taken from for next year's harvest.

The early rain and the late rain has always been tied to the Mosaic promises made. In Deuteronomy, we read a conditional relationship here addressing the congregation in wilderness. The Lord says through his servant Moses, and if you indeed will obey my commandments, I command you today to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul. He will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil.

And you will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be full. The Mosaic covenant is again seeking to establish where the heart of God's followers are looking towards themselves, towards God.

We now, in the here and now, are in a land waiting for the rain in its season. As James tells us, we are to wait as the farmer for the fruits of the land.

[19:13] The early rain is the time of planting. It is for the sowing of the seed. Our Lord Jesus Christ and Savior was the living water who came to bring life.

He is the early rain, the announcement of a new age. for those who turn away from him will not even be able to approach the harvest.

There's a warning also given in Deuteronomy 11. Take care unless your heart be deceived to be tricked, to be fooled, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them, just like the rich man in James chapter 5.

Then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens so there will be no rain, and the land will yield no fruit, and you will perish quickly off the good land that the Lord has given you.

The conditional covenant of Deuteronomy foreshadowed the consequences of the gospel. People will either turn their hearts towards the Lord, or they will turn their hearts towards themselves and other gods.

[20:28] In the second chapter of the prophet Job, the Lord calls his people to repent and return to him. Job writes, Yet even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.

And when their people turn their heads back to the Lord, he restores them, writing, Be glad, O children of Zion, and rejoice in the Lord your God, for he has given you the early rain for your vindication.

He has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain as before. We're called to imitate the farmer, to be patient, and wait.

Does the farmer really have a choice when he waits for his crops? No. The farmer can't make the seeds grow.

He has no choice but to wait. Joe reminds us of the effects of the rain, and it shall come to pass, this shall be familiar to all of us afterwards, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh.

[21:48] Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

We see an age of growth as the church has grown, and then finally we see the day of harvest. The prophet Joel writes, I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke.

The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

For in Mount Zion and Jerusalem there shall be those who escape. as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls. Jesus Christ is also the later reign. It's an announcement of judgment for those who have turned their hearts towards their own selfish desires. Those who have turned their hearts away from God.

[22 : 55] But it is announcement of rejoicing for those who have suffered in the present age of the expectation of Christ's return. How are we to be patient then to establish our hearts?

Well, as we reminded from Caleb's quote from Cranmer last week that I can't remember off the top of my head, but the, our hearts really dictates our actions.

I think it was what the heart loves, the mind vindicates. Ah, you know what? I'm not going to try it. He'll give it again, I'm sure. But, um, this idea that, uh, what our heart loves, we live out in our lives. If we love Christ, if we are waiting with an expectation, that has something to do with how we live our lives here amongst each other on the horizontal plane.

James reminds us in verse 9, Do not grumble against one another's brothers, so that you may not be judged. Behold the judge standing at the door.

[24 : 08] This has in it, not that I've experienced, but the picture of two kids screaming and fighting each other, who realize when their parents are the next room over, you can hear the argument go from a screaming level to kind of a dropping down to a whisper.

You ever had kids fight in a whisper before? It happens with the same intensity that it does at screams, but the thing that's changed is the presence of the parent and the recognition that there could be impending judgment on the other end of this argument.

So kids try to get by it. I'm sure none of my children have done it, but, um... James is clear.

Grumbling against each other is the same as criticizing God's work.

If you think that things aren't working well in your local context or the global context within the church, and you grumble against how it's going, what you're actually doing is criticizing the one that called out the church.

For those that thought the plan of God was destroyed when the fires raged in Notre Dame, or when wicked people overrun or destroy almost the entire population of a nation, the idea that God's work is ended on this planet, is really a criticism of Him.

[25 : 46] That works out in here, at this parish. It works out in our families. It works out in our marriages. Are we so surprised that the church we are called to serve in is full of messed up people?

That this works itself out imperfectly? Our call is to love each other as Christ did, laying down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

This isn't the first time James has dealt with this topic. He reminds him in James chapter 4. Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother speaks evil against the law.

And by extension, the one who is who instituted that law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge. And James reminds his readers.

There is only one lawgiver and judge. He who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

[27 : 00] James reminds us back in chapter 5. As an example of suffering and patience, you want to know how to do this?

Look to this example. That's what James is saying. Take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. When you look around at the work of church and don't understand what it is possibly that God is working out in your day, consider the prophets, who also were given promises by God and almost never saw them played out.

Jesus reminds us in John chapter 8. Your father Abraham rejoiced that you would see my day. He saw it and was glad. Abraham rejoiced in the promise of Christ, but never got the chance to see him while he was on this life.

Abraham died before the promises were given to him. But he rejoiced in the reality he knew that was to come because he trusted in a faithful Lord. Need another example?

James says, Behold, we consider those blessed who remain steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

[28:22] The valley of anticipation, the place between the early rain and the latter rain is a place of blessing.

For the suffering and sacrifice of this age is a badge and a sign that we are heirs of the world yet to come. Though it seems dark, we face only the shadow of death, not the reality of it.

We will wait and watch patiently as our Good Shepherd leads us through it, and we will fear no evil. If it is the looking back and around that confuses and dismays us, it is the anticipation of the future that restores order.

And when the waiting feels interminable, we remember the closing words of this chapter where James tells us, again, how we are to care for each other in fraternal and mutual love during the sufferings and the trials of this life, and then tells us how to wait out the present age while remaining faithful to our Lord.

James reminds us, again, not covering over the fact that this life is difficult, that it's full of disappointment, but he recognizes that this is part of the life of the church in this age.

[29:46] Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed.

And James reminds us, the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. And James asks us, does it feel like this life will never end?

Does it feel like you can't go on? Does it feel like it has been forever since the early rain, that the latter rain will never come? He reminds us that Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. But then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit and brought in its harvest. And we remember that as we pray, even so come quickly, Lord Jesus, that he will come again and lay out a rain.

[31:07] Brothers and sisters, you cannot and will not live your best life now. And it would be a wicked lie for me to say so.

But I can promise you this with every fiber of my being, because the word of Almighty God tells me so, the latter rains will come, and the harvest will be bountiful beyond measure.

And if the waiting is tiring, and you don't know if you can continue, take to heart the words of our Savior. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.