

Sermon transcript

St Philip Oak Bay

9.30am Eucharist **15 September 2024**

Preacher: Fr Allen Doerksen



St. Philip Anglican Church

A Spacious Place of Welcome

There's the Diagnosis and Then There's the Cure

Season Of Creation Part 3

Reference: James 3:1-12

Fr. Allen credits his wife, the Rev. Denise Doerksen for noticing all the Creation imagery in the text from James. This reminds Fr. Allen of Indigenous spirituality and a conversation he had with a respected Elder. Creation is our home, but it can also inform how we understand the grace and call of Christ.

<https://www.stphilipvictoria.ca/podcasts/media/2024-09-15-there-s-the-diagnosis-and-then-there-s-the-cure--321>

[00:25] So, having prompted you during the children's talk, I'll start with a question: When you were listening to that first reading from the Letter of James, what stood out for you? Think about it for a second. I'm sure, different things for different ones of us. What stood out for me, probably no surprise really, is the bit about "Not many of you should become teachers, [1:00] for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." I mean, it's a little bit of a meta teaching, isn't it, like teaching about teaching? Not that James is trying to implement a grading system for our relative verbal pyrotechnics, you know, our rhetoric. He's not trying to do that, but he is encouraging all teachers and all listeners, indeed, calling people to be wise and ask whether their spiritual or religious teachers are truly helping them - we would say helping people towards human flourishing, on the one end of the continuum, or whether we're actually moving people more towards division, isolation [2:00] and false claims on the other.

I think one of the reasons that priests get prayed for each week is not because we're special, but because people understand that they would like the priest to stay closer to the healthier end of that spectrum. And I think we need prayer in order to get there. As I was saying about smugness last week, so I could say here in this context that teachers too easily assume that what they are saying is helpful and true. And so one of my professors used to say to me, "Stay surprised that what you are saying is helpful. Don't assume it. And when someone says they were helped, be genuinely surprised." Now, some of you no doubt twigged on how [3:00] James moved on from that to "speech" more generally, implicating anyone who can communicate - that is, most of the human race. I'm imagining that if James were writing today, he'd make sure to mention emails, texts, posts, sign language - basically

any kind of communication. And for James, how you and I communicate shapes worlds, for the better or worse. And we'll get back to that. In this part of the world, maybe you notice the mention of ships and rudders - that may have caught your sail.

Or maybe, like my dear partner, someone who seems to have what cognitive scientists call a naturalist intelligence - did you know, there's [4:00] 9 identifiable intelligences? There's things like a bodily kinesthetic intelligence: think jugglers, trapeze artists, ballerinas. There's numerical intelligence, the science and math show-offs. I'm not jealous. There's interpersonal intelligence, people who are just amazing at connecting people. And on I could go. - She'll be driving, so imagine this is the road down the center. Eyes on the road. I'll be scanning the sides of the road, looking here, there. Then she'll say, hey, did you see the bear just go into the bush? Well no, I didn't, because A) I don't have eyes on the sides of my head like apparently you do, [5:00] and B) there probably wasn't a bear and then, on a lark I'll just yank my body around and look, and yep, sure enough, there's a bear ambling into the bush. That's happened so many times, in a vehicle or outside of a vehicle, with so many different kinds of creatures, it is quite ridiculous.

So when I asked her what text she was preaching on this week, she said, "Oh, did you notice how James is a great text for the Season of Creation?" I guess my stare gave it away. Basically saying, what are you talking about? "Look!" she said. "You know, the stuff about horses and forests and beasts and birds and reptiles and sea creatures and fig trees and figs and olives and grapevines and brackish and fresh water?" [6:00] All I could come up with was, "Ah, yes, so it is." How can I be that blind?

Later, sitting down and thinking about what I wanted to say in this sermon, I reflected on how James's imagery is akin to Indigenous teaching, though of course there are quite a few differences as well. Indigenous teaching doesn't imagine that human beings are separate from creation, but integrally a part of it, creatures in creation, connected to it in every way, subject to it, in a way that people living in climate-controlled domiciles, driving around in our horseless carriages, we can hardly comprehend it, [7:00] scarcely imagine it.

But neither is indigenous teaching some kind of naive "nature is sacred and everything and everyone is connected", end of story. It notices what all wisdom teaching, what the letter of James, notices: that human beings often don't fit the pattern. We're a problem to ourselves. There's an ought-ness that is somehow not present. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so, James says, in reference to our divided selves. We are part of creation, yet we have the capacity to tame it. Even though James, now tapping into a more Greek way of thinking, is exaggerating when he says that humans have tamed every creature imaginable. [8:00] But I get it. He's trying to set up a tragic paradox: we have this incredible capacity to tame everything - but not our tongue. Our tongue here is a synecdoche, which means it stands in for the whole. The tongue represents everything we say and everything we do.

We can harness the forces of nature, we can put the bit in the horse's mouth, but we can't do the same for ourselves.

This is what ought not to be. Instead of watering our environment, our relationships, we too often spew poison, we too often pour brackish water on everything and wonder why we're getting sick, or why the plants aren't growing. [9:00] 500 years ago at the Reformation, Martin Luther thought that James was correct in his diagnosis of what we ought to be. We have this capacity to be a blessing creature, instead of so often being a cursing one. But Luther also thought that overall, James's perspective was an epistle of straw because James didn't clearly enough point us in the direction of the cure: of grace. The power of grace to cure the heart, the power of grace producing a "saving faith" that finds forgiveness and love at the heart of God.

And I agree with Luther that Paul the Apostle is a far more valuable resource to show us [10:00] how we actually go on this grand, great adventure of becoming good, becoming faithful, becoming people who live from forgiveness and love. But I also think that to read Paul without James is to make a transactional mess out of our relationship with God and the world. I grew up in a home - and I don't want you to misunderstand me here, a home I'm extremely thankful for and proud of - I grew up in a home that revered Paul, but revered Paul alone. We rarely read or heard illustrations from the Gospels, from the Catholic Epistles, as James is known as, or the Hebrew Scriptures. And so, really no accident [11:00] that we were taught, even if only implicitly, to have a transactional relationship with creation. Whatever we could tame and use was good, but never forget, heaven is your true home, Allen. We're just passing through.

Now that we live in a time when all of these fundamentalist chickens have started to come home to roost. We see that our attempts to tame nature, which we imagine as our calling, has been translated into, "let's just use it up, because this isn't our real home." No surprise, then, that that becomes extended, and we try to tame each other, projecting onto others [12:00] control and subjugation. That there is a direct link between these two ways of looking at the world has been shown by many analysts and writers. These are projections, James implies, of warped imaginations, projections of our warped attempts to avoid our true calling to become blessers, not cursers. To become in essence relational weavers, to use a term that David Brooks uses, weavers of grace and love, instead of cursers who rend the environmental and social fabric.

Last year I had a really significant conversation with Doctor Martin Brokenleg, in which he shared that his Indigenous spirituality of creation [13:00] was his Old Testament. And he said, you know, the grace of Christ that I've learned in the church is meant to complete creation but never overturn it. Just as validly, he continued to say creation is meant to help us better understand the power of grace and Christ. He needed, he said, the person James calls our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, in order to understand his own cultural heritage in a

richer way, and he needed his own cultural spirituality, which is largely focused on creation, to come to a more nuanced and integrated understanding of Christianity.

I mean this is [14:00] amazing to me. His spirituality, Dr. Brokenleg's story, is 10,000 years old. Ten thousand. It's phenomenally deep, rich and connected to creation, but it too is still on a journey of becoming. I was humbled to hear him say that that spirituality has not been diminished but enlarged by Christ. But then he flipped the script. Imagine how much richer our Christian faith would be if it was integrated with a 10,000-year-old back story. In other words, the Holocene age - if that was the context within which we understood the [15:00] call of Christ. As we're coming to see in our world, a transactional Christianity is incredibly shallow and warped.

From people like Doctor Brokenleg, from Denise, from the Hebrew Scriptures, and writers like James and Paul, amongst many others, I've been learning to open myself to the great everything. The Great Everything: to take a long, loving look at the real, at what is our original covenant: creation. And there, we don't avoid Christ. We meet Christ who comes alongside, who reveals himself as the inner wisdom of indigenous teaching and Jewish struggles, as the one who is in us, in you [16:00], and will work through you to make sense of your back story, help you notice where you are and therefore who you are, the one who forgives your cursing, that you experience blessing, and become a blesser to all that are around you. May it be so, in and through our collective work as a parish, and in and through our individual hearts. Amen.