

**November 15, 2020 | Journey worship service**

**TEXT: [James 1:1-12](#)**

**THEME: Harvest**

**TITLE: People of Straw and Strength**

*By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy*

The identity of the author of this epistle has been questioned and discussed for centuries. Was he James, the brother of Jesus or was he one of the sons of Zebedee, the brother of John? The book of James does not explicitly say anything about Jesus, so how can it contribute to the formation of Christian faith? The salutation in James greets the twelve tribes of the diaspora, the many Christian Jews living outside of the Promised Land and for us today.

Martin Luther, the 16<sup>th</sup> century theologian and religious reformer, who was the catalyst of the Protestant Reformation, referred to James' letter as "an epistle of straw," because he deemed the epistle to be an uninspiring interpretation of the gospel and he felt it might foster a doctrine of works-righteousness among Christians. Now, according to Google, even straw has some redeeming uses and qualities. Straw is a byproduct from the harvesting of wheat and is used as bedding for animals, garden mulch, heating, ethanol production, food for cattle, and building material. Straw is useful for many purposes. And, despite Luther's declaration concerning the book of James, he later wrote:

*"I praise it and consider it a good book, because it sets up no doctrines of men but vigorously promulgates the law of God; the author must not have been an apostle, but instead must have been some good, pious man, who took a few sayings from the disciples of the apostles and concludes that the author wanted to guard against those who relied on faith without works. I cannot include him among the chief books, though I would not thereby prevent anyone from including or extolling him as he pleases, for there are otherwise many good sayings in him (LW 35:395-97)."*

Many good sayings indeed. For James acknowledges and warns that living a Christian life will not be easy, we will face trials and tribulation. I have been known to say that life is not for the faint of heart, and 2020 has proven that to be true, but not just for Christians, for everyone. I will not take the time to call the roll of all that has occurred thus far this year. However, we have all been impacted in one way or another.

We are all living as people of the diaspora. Unable to freely travel or go about without wearing a protective mask. It is inadvisable to interact with others not living in our individual households, we cannot visit family and friends, the sick or family members living in facilities. We are unable to mourn and celebrate the lives our loved ones who have died; our children are learning at home, putting an added burden on families. Other than virtually, we cannot gather to worship as a faith community; and for those of us who still working, our homes have become our around the clock workplaces. We are living in a foreign land, uncharted territory, peculiar and unique times.

Yet, James tells us to find joy in the trials and the unprecedented times we encounter in life, for the testing of our faith will produce endurance. One commentator writes, “There will be the tests of the dangers, the sacrifices, the unpopularity which the Christian way must so often involve. But they are not meant to make us fall; they are meant to make us soar. They are not meant to defeat us; they are meant to be defeated. They are not meant to make us weaker; they are meant to make us stronger. Therefore, we should not bemoan them; we should rejoice in them” (William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series, The Letters of James and Peter*, rev. ed., Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967, 43).

Just as the athlete in training is made stronger, able to run faster, jump higher, expend more energy, and work out longer as they train; as we endure, work through, lean on one another and trust God to bring us through tests, trials, and temptations, our Christian walk and witness is strengthened and matures. We begin to see the move and work of God more clearly; we become better able to bear the burdens, trials, transitions, and curves in life, not as people living in denial or with unrealistic expectations, but with an eye on the end result. A realization that this joy that we have exceeds that which the world gives. This joy we have is able to supersede and overcome, for this joy we have is God-given and it is implanted within our very being. We move, breath and have our very being in the joy of the Lord, and life’s setbacks, persecution, or nothing else can destroy it or separate us from it.

This joy we have is God-given and comes from within, so that even when the world is in disarray, our lives are upside down, and we do not see the end in sight – we keep our eye on the one who has brought us through seen and unseen dangers. We keep our trust in the one who opened doors we did not see. We keep our hearts and minds stayed on Jesus who loves us, redeemed us and is yet making intercessions on our behalf. We hold fast to the truth that if it had not been for the Lord who is on our side, we would be a people most pitiful, without hope. And even when we unable to see or understand, we still trust and believe that God is in the midst and will redeem and work everything out for our good.

Now, despite all that, James is not suggesting or inferring that as we endure and overcome tests in life, we will become religious, moral, or always faithful superheroes. James leaves space for those of us who waver from time to time, who do not understand why there is so much suffering in the world; who do not understand why hatred, racism, classism, sexism, tribalism, or all the other “isms”, injustices, oppression, and inequities have come out of the shadows and up from the underground, are so pervasive, and tearing at the very fabric of the world.

James tells us not to accept that this is just the way things are, or to take a passive stance that we’re just going to wait until things blow over, but we are to turn to and depend on God, as we move to challenge and change the conventional and convenient standards of the world. James states that faith without works is dead. Both are integral to living the Christian life, to reaching perfection, to glorifying God.

Yet, we cannot challenge and change the world, nor we do not reach perfection or glorify God, in our own strength, we do so by seeking the gift of Godly wisdom in faith. Although James states that those who doubt, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord, he is not suggesting that Christians are never doubtful. When doubt sets in, ask God, who is faithful and God will answer, God will strengthen our faith and move us closer to perfection. One commentator states, "On the one hand, those without wisdom are to ask God for it. On the other, God only responds to the prayer of those whose hearts are committed to God's way. Such single-hearted devotion already exhibits the perfection that is the object of praying for wisdom. Such paradoxes, the commentator continues, are inherent in the life of faith. God's grace is already active in those who pray faithfully to receive it." (Pheme Perkins, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary*, John Knox Press: Louisville, 1995, 99)

God is already active in our lives, and according to James, God gives generously and ungrudgingly to those who ask, seek, worship, and have faith in God. This is God's word of assurance for us today. When we ask, it shall be given, when we seek, we shall find, and when we knock the door shall be opened (Matt. 7:7). According to Luther, James' epistle of straw, may be lackluster, uninspiring, and tout works over faith. However, just as straw, the by-product of harvesting wheat, has many uses, including contributing to the stability of the construction of a building, the Epistle of James contributes greatly to the construction and stability of our faith formation. James rightly states that as we persevere in life, we are made stronger, wiser, and able to endure as God moves us closer to perfection that is made evident as we work to make the world in which we live a place where everyone, the "have gots" as well as the have nots are valued, cherished, respected, and loved.

Please allow me to transliterate or put my own spin on a quote from earlier in the sermon. The tests, trials, tribulations and dangers, sacrifices, suffering, and sorrow, the pain, separation, and the unpopularity that Christians often experience and endure do not come to make us fall; they are meant to make us soar. They are not meant to defeat us; they are meant to be defeated. They are not meant to make us weaker; they are meant to make us stronger. Therefore, we should not bemoan them; we should rejoice and be glad, glorify and thank God, for just as straw strengthens and stabilizes brick, as the Hebrews experienced while in exile in Egypt; as we go through God is shaping, healing, fortifying, transforming, and perfecting us, for we are not only people of straw, we are also, the people of God.

Amen