

**Sermon for September 13, 2015 (Proper 19 kinda, Year B)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: James 1:1-16; Psalm 19:7-14; Mark 8:27-38

Title: We Choose the Way of Life – An Introduction to the Letter of James

“Welcome Home” everyone! Whether you have been here faithfully every Sunday of the summer, or whether you have taken the summer off and decided to enjoy sleeping in on Sundays, or even if you are here with us for the very first time – to one and all, I say “Welcome Home to Saint Mary’s!”

My friends, it is good for us to be here together this morning. With the start of this new program year, we are beginning a new teaching series that will take us through every single verse of the Letter of James in the New Testament.

So we need to begin this morning with a little bit of background. But before we begin, let me ask you this: Did you know that James and Jacob are the very same name? It’s odd, isn’t it?

The name given to this letter in the original Greek is “Yacobos”, which is a translation of the Hebrew name “Yakov” which is translated into English as Jacob. So from Jacob in Hebrew we get “Jacob”, and from Jacob in Greek we get “James”. I have no idea how that happened, and it may be a bit of useless trivia perhaps, but it does also tell us something very important about this Letter.

“Yakov” or Jacob is a very, very important Hebrew name, being derived from one of the patriarchs, the grandson of Abraham. This tells us that the author of this Letter is a Jew and comes from a Jewish family.

So who exactly is this James? We’ll stick with the traditional English ascription of “James” in order to avoid confusion. So who is this Jewish James?

The Letter actually tells us nothing about the author’s identity, but tradition tells us that this is James the brother of Jesus.

Tradition also tells us that he is called James the Just, due to being a very devout and observant Jew, and that he was the first bishop – or overseer – of the new messianic Jewish community in Jerusalem.

As with most of the books of the Bible, there is no way to know for sure who wrote the text. And James (or Jacob) was (and still is) a very popular Jewish name. So there are many possible candidates.

But there is good reason to stick with the tradition here, and so for our purposes we will assume that this correspondence came from James who was part of the family of Jesus.

At the very least, it seems clear that it originated in his community of faithful Jews in Jerusalem who believed that the Messiah had come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Letter of James speaks from the foundation of God's word spoken in the Torah and the prophets of Israel.

It is a very Jewish text, and in the ancient tradition of Israel, James presents us here this morning at the very beginning – and throughout the Letter – with the challenge of choosing between two divergent ways: the way of life and the way of death.

The way of death is presented here as the way of doubt, the way of immaturity, the way of arrogant boasting, the way of a busy and wealthy life, the way of lustful desire and sin.

By contrast, the way of life is generously provided by God. It is the way of endurance, the way of trust, the way of humility, the way of standing firm in the face of temptation.

The key is found in verse 5, which goes as follows: "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you."

Ah, this is such a beautiful vision! God gives to all generously and ungrudgingly. All you have to do is ask.

By contrast, the doubter is one who is double-minded and unstable.

My friends, the Greek language here is subtle, but it is profound!

James picks up and shines the spotlight on one of the key insights of the teachings of Jesus. To be complete, mature, fulfilled and whole in the same way that God is means that you must be “haplos” – single-minded.

This is in contrast to “duplos” which is double-minded.

In the vision of Jesus and of James, God is “haplos” – one, simple in nature, single-minded toward humanity, one who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly.

By contrast, humans are most often “duplos” – multi-faceted, confused, uncertain, discriminatory, prejudiced, often greedy and begrudging in our giving.

Can you see the distinction between those two modes of being?

The “haplos” nature of God and the “duplos” nature of humanity?

What we will find, over and over again as a consistent theme throughout this Letter of James, is a call to turn away from the double-minded confusion of ordinary human existence – which leads to spiritual death – and to walk faithfully along the way of life taught to us – and given to us graciously – by the Lord.

At our Thursday Eucharist in the Chapel, we had the opportunity to contemplate together a remarkable story of this single-minded generosity which reflects the heart of God. It is the story of the Martyrs of Memphis which the Church commemorates each year on September 9.

In 1878, a disastrous outbreak of Yellow Fever struck the city of Memphis, Tennessee. There happened to be a new community of Episcopal nuns in Memphis at the time who ran a school for the poor and provided nursing care to the sick. When the Fever struck, half of the city’s residents (the ones with financial resources, of course) fled the city in terror. The panic was so severe that a number of people were trampled to death at the train station as the well-to-do packed onto trains to flee.

The Sisters of Saint Mary were offered a place of refuge and safety out in the countryside away from the plague, but they refused, choosing instead to serve the sick and the dying poor in the city. Each of them knew what risk this entailed. At the height of the epidemic, about 80 people were dying each day in the city of Memphis. And no one would bury the dead, for fear that the Fever could be spread by contact with those infected.

The outcome was inevitable. 4 out of the 7 sisters died from the Fever; two priests who stayed and worked at the Cathedral in Memphis alongside the Sisters also died.

These are called the Martyrs of Memphis because - paradoxically – they chose to follow the way of life by facing death, by serving life and denying self. They chose to give to all simply, generously and ungrudgingly, in the same way that God gives.

Throughout the course of the upcoming 9 Sundays as we explore this Letter of James together, we also will be asked to choose, in very concrete actions, between the way of death and the way of life.

And, as we know, in the spiritual world, everything builds upon the intention of the heart. That is always the starting point.

Therefore, to make a good start of our study together, IF you are prepared to do so, I ask you all to repeat these 6 words after me – with intention, with single-mindedness, with conviction – and say after me:

WE CHOOSE THE WAY OF LIFE.

Good! Because, my friends, that is why we are here! This is why we gather as “church”! To learn together about God’s good way of life and to discover how we might embody this way of life in the decision and actions that we undertake every single day.

Yes, the age we live in now is vastly different from the era of James and those early messianic Jews, but the choice between the way of death and the way of life remains constant as our existential reality.

So let us walk in this journey together, learning and being challenged together by the Letter of James in the weeks to come.

And as we do so, may the Lord open our hearts and our minds and guide us along the good way of life. Amen.