

Wisdom from Above

James 3: 13—4:6

**First Presbyterian Church
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After the tornadoes came through South Louisiana last week, several friends who saw reports were kind enough to check on us. One inquiry came from a friend in the British Isles. When we knew her years ago, she lived five minutes from here:



That's Loch Morar, the deepest of the Scottish lochs, totally remote and totally peaceful. I've never felt as lost in the mystic as the afternoon I walked along its banks for several hours. There's something about deep water, solid mountains and the sound of sheep replacing the sound of motors. One feels not just calm, but anciently peaceful. Considered over time, in the depths and heights, we see that God is in control and ultimately everything is all right.

So I was a bit surprised to get this answer after I inquired about how she was doing. "We are all aghast about Trump, and looking for ways to protest...What I find shattering is that views that seemed off the wall, totally unreasonable two weeks ago are now seen as mainline and quite OK." It was her language that struck me more than her political views. *Aghast. Shattered.* Does not the memory of Loch Morar speak any word about the deep peace of God's sovereignty amidst the ever-changing pendulum swings of human history? Is the sky really falling?

Perhaps you've noticed the atmosphere in the country as reported by our news media and our social media. *Hysteria* is a word that comes close to describing it. *Frenetic* is another word. *Threatened. Fearful. Anxious. Belligerent* are other words that arise. What strikes me keenly is not that different views exist among us. It's that the last months have revealed an appalling lack of inner reserve within our citizens. Where is the peace and the confidence and the faith that allows one to remain steady amidst the tumult? The inner strength that saw us through world wars and great depressions? People seem to me completely moorless, bobbing wildly and with astonishment on waves stirred around them. Or finding meaning in the emotional rush of taking a stand not because of deep thought but because this is the thing we are all now doing. This is the latest Reality Show we're all buzzing about, the way we become like our celebrities.

Hysteria can be contagious. It can make us feel urgent. That we have to jump into the fray. Express our opinion, too. Get others corrected. Shout back. Our former associate pastor Alec Flynt had a Sunday off in late January and went to an EPC church near New York City. The pastor in his sermon leaped into the middle of the national scuffles as he went off feverishly on the President's immigration policy. For Alec, it was not so much his views as the fact that he took precious pulpit time to take a political stand better articulated in many other arenas. Meanwhile, the worshippers left hungry, longing for a gospel that creates steadiness amidst turmoil and peace amidst the madness. All they got was encouragement to more frenzy.

The church, it seems to me, has an important steadying role to play in our culture now. We are the people who sink deep roots into Jesus Christ. We live *from* a deeper source. We live from the saving work he accomplished for the world as the fuel for our life. Then we have energy to live *for* the mission he gave his people as the purpose of life. We trust that Jesus is Lord of lords and King of kings, and he will bring about the new heavens and the new earth according to his plan. Our work is to speak the story with words and to show the story with love. To offer real hope, real steadiness, and real peace.

This kind of community is exactly what James is talking about in our passage today. James writes about *wisdom from above*. That's a powerful phrase: wisdom from above. Wisdom is the practical outworking of the purpose and principles you live by. It's what you decide to do in a situation based on your experiences and beliefs. James wants the church to live from the wisdom that comes from above, from God, rather than the wisdom that comes from below, from the world. In our passage, he contrasts the two kinds of wisdom and the consequences of each.

James wants the church to be a community of Christ that truly exhibits his character. He paints the picture of a family of faith in which each person is "wise and understanding." This gets expressed by our good conduct as we show our works in the meekness of heavenly wisdom. That's a lot to unpack. But Bible scholar Alec Motyer helps us when he says that another way to translate "good conduct" is "lovely life." A beautiful, compelling, attractive life is one that is lived out in wise works enacted with a humble spirit. A lovely life of wise works. A life of purposeful restraint of passions. A life made beautiful more by what it does than what it *posts*. A lovely life revealed by how it cares rather than how it promotes itself. This is the long steady, slow, sure work of making peace, creating well-being for others, showing mercy and living rightly. It's a life that is clean and

sober. A life that is other focused and understated. It's a life that looks boring but is actually deeply satisfying. It burns with joy that is not a flaring rocket but a steady flame. It's a life often not fully recognized until it has run its course and people realize how much it mattered. A community of such people could do a lot of good if they were sent out into a frantic world as a calming, steadying presence. We have the pipeline that leads deep beneath the surface of whatever is creating hysteria in the moment. We tap into the ocean of peace of in the heart of God. A battalion of people living from the deep peace of Christ could make a huge difference to the tumult so many people are feeling these days.

I was amazed once again this week to see how the interconnectedness of our community of Christ, our church, works in my own life. A group of women from our church is reading a book called *Draw Near to the Flame*. Since Rhonda is enjoying being in that group, I thought I'd like to read the book too. On Monday, the author urged me to draw near to Christ, to enter his presence, and to seek a personal encounter with him. I decided to turn to one of the most reliable passages into God's presence that I know. Psalm 27. This psalm has an immediate calming effect. It begins,

The LORD is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the strength of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?

Immediately I am being drawn out of a world of fear and tumult and drawn towards the light, the salvation, the strength, and the shelter of the LORD's presence.

Psalm 27:4 goes on to reveal the quest of the heart to know this God more intimately:

One thing have I asked of the LORD.
That also will I seek after;
That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,
To gaze upon the beauty of the LORD,
And to inquire in his temple.

The LORD himself draws us to himself by his beauty. He is attractational because he is gorgeous, powerful, wise, mysterious, inviting, commanding, strong, tender, available, and transcendent. Praying this psalm unclogged my channels to God. It cleared out all the vain pursuits pinging around my addled brain and directed me to my first love.

That time of personal prayer also created a link to a meeting I had to lead on Tuesday. At the end of the month, we have a new director of discipleship, Darin Travis, joining our staff. It gives us an opportunity to rethink how we do discipleship at our church. Some of our senior staff reminded me how many areas of church life intersect with discipleship. Perhaps we could make discipleship a team effort crossing into all that we do. So I planned a meeting in which we would use this sentence as a definition for discipleship at our church:

To effectively encourage others to live more deeply *from* Jesus Christ

In order that:

They might live more effectively *for* Christ in the world.

We then considered how every area of church life intersects with that primary goal. Whether it's children or men's ministry, youth or mission, women's ministry or community life, worship or administration, it all contributes to how we help people live both *from* Christ Jesus in their hearts and *for* Christ Jesus in the world.

What I realized reading Psalm 27 is that David actually gives a statement of his life's passion and how it works out in his single driving focus for all his actions. He gives a mission and strategy statement for his life:

"One thing have I asked of the LORD." If he could make one request that summed up all his desire in life, what would it be? What does he want most in his life? What is his driving passion? Then, once he says that, what will he do about it? David says he will pursue it. One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after. This is my passion. This is what I'm going to do to pursue that passion. Then he tells it to us. His one desire has three parts:

- 1) To dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life.
- 2) To behold the beauty of the LORD.
- 3) To inquire in his temple.

So, is David's passion to sit in the pew of a sanctuary all day every day? Of course not. The house of the LORD is where God made himself particularly known to his people. The God who is everywhere said that of all the places of the world, he would put his personal presence in his temple. There would be his name, his Word, and his glory. But David knew, and we all knew, that the building is just a symbol. The reality is not the edifice but the worshipping community. The apostle Paul would tell us that we, Christ's people, are his temple (I Cor. 6). The apostle Peter would go on to write that we are each stones being built into a great house of

worship (I Pe. 2). Our lives are living stones, and in the community of our worship, we offer a sacrifice of praise, acknowledging the LORD and adoring the ways he has saved us. We hear his Word and behold his beauty. It is here, in the gathered church, that we come to make inquiries of the LORD. To ask the big questions of life. To seek to understand the meaning in our suffering. To find answers to our doubts. To discover companions in our explorations. To learn beautiful things about Jesus that light up our lives.

These links occurred because I allowed the community of Christ to shape what I was reading. And then I allowed what I was reading to direct my practice. The connection I made personally with Christ allowed me to make a connection back out to the whole community of Christ. This inter-linking is what happens when together we are questing for Jesus as we gather together. The Spirit makes connections in every area of life for those who meet in Jesus' name.

And then, it rippled further. My excitement about Psalm 27 led me to read it at the beginning of the Bible studies I lead. We read Psalm 27 before we studied James 3. And the participants noticed how Psalm 27 contains the antidote to the disorder and frenzy that James says comes from selfish ambition and jealousy. Such discordant passions arise from the fear that I have to fill in the gaps in my life myself. I have to get what I want because if I don't I'll die. I have to have what you have or I will be left behind.

The hysteria in our culture also arises from fear. There are many people who have a high investment in people staying afraid. Fear drives viewership. I need to find out what awful thing has happened next. Fear drives purchases of products. I have to have this to be all right, to be acceptable, or to be noticed. Fear drives all we spend to create bunkers of security and isolation. I have to do this to be safe.

James offers the alternative of wisdom from above. It's Psalm 27 that takes us to that wisdom. The LORD is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life, of whom shall I be afraid? Because the LORD is my rock, my shelter and my stronghold, I can hear the final words of the psalm and trust them: "Wait for the LORD. Be strong and let your heart take courage. Wait for the LORD."

In both my study groups, we noticed that reading Psalm 27 creates in our hearts what the words describe. Saying it aloud takes away fear and restores peace. The psalm orders our lives. It does not remove enemies, but gives us courage to face their adversity. It does not make trouble go away, but grounds us in a deeper

peace. It restores our hope in God's future. It fills in the emptiness that no human being nor human security can fill.

When we tap into that, we receive what James calls the wisdom from above. I don't need to base my actions on the hysteria in the world. I don't need to build my security on addressing every new fear someone will try to get me to worry about. (Because there will always be another one). I have another task. I am to sow peace. The church is a farmer in this world. We have some stony ground to plow. We have some poor soil in which to get growth to occur. But that is our task. We are to sow seeds of peace in the world. We plant peace in expectation of a harvest of peace. So I am to overcome bitterness by being a reconciler in relationships. I am to be a restorer of trust by my trustworthiness. I am to fill in loneliness by my faithful presence. I am to invite others out of the hard shell of fear that has them bound up in anxiety by gentle, patient concern.

And above all, I am to offer the peace of the Prince of Peace. The good news is that God has gotten himself reconciled to the world. He has made peace with us because he established a full amnesty and pardon for us by the life, death and resurrection of his Son. He has overcome every barrier to our knowing him. Now we, his people, join Paul in saying, "I urge you, by the mercies of Christ, to be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5). He has reconciled himself to you. Now you get reconciled to him. Give up your rage that life didn't turn out the way you wanted it to, and put yourself in his hands. Let go the vain hope that you will be the first person in history to figure out how to live joyfully and bravely without God: it won't work! Give up the trinkets and treasures that substitute for a real relationship with the living God. They will only enslave you at the end. God has reconciled himself to you in Christ. He is our peace. Get reconciled to him by actively placing your faith in him. Become, ever more deeply, one of his team, one who answers the world's hysteria by sowing peace. Daily, steadily, consistently, until we reap a harvest of a vast multitude restored to their heavenly Father by the work of the eternal Son Jesus in the power of the blessed Holy Spirit.