

23 October 2022
Commemoration of St. James of Jerusalem

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Most Unlikely Bishop”

Text: Matthew 13:54-58; James 1:1-12; Acts 15:12-22a

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The full title for this Sunday is the *Commemoration of Saint James of Jerusalem, Brother of our Lord, and Martyr*. That is, James was put to death because of his faith in his brother Jesus, that He was the promised Messiah. Now, James was probably the person most surprised by this of anybody, for he didn't start out believing this about his brother. Who would? Who could? James had the reputation of being a very pious Jew, and so what His brother preached and taught probably confused him, and with the others of his hometown, offended him. Both because of what was being said and who was saying it. But then after his brother appeared to him after being crucified and then rising from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:7), and by the work of the Holy Spirit in his heart, he believed. And if he had been writing the catechism, he would have whole-heartedly agreed with Luther, when he wrote: *I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength, believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him*. But then after the work of God in his heart, so sure, so steadfast was he that, according to extra-biblical sources, he was thrown off the pinnacle of the temple and then clubbed to death for his faith. For *this* that he had come to believe: that his brother Jesus, was the Son of God, His Saviour. The one risen from the dead, and the one who would raise him from the dead. The one he didn't just live with in his house in Galilee, but the one he would live with forever in heaven.

So maybe it was that James was writing about himself when he wrote his Epistle that we heard from today. He was the man who had enduring testing, he was the man who doubted, he was the man who knew humiliation. But it all turned out for his good. It strengthened him. It established him in the truth. It produced in him a steadfast faith which looks beyond the things of this world and life, to the things that are eternal. For this world and life are passing away. But life in Jesus is eternal. Life in Jesus leads to ***the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him***.

Again, this was no small change in James. One that probably surprised him most of all. And it is no small change in you either. One that you did not do, but like James, was the work of the Holy Spirit in you. And one that has consequences for your life and how you live it. It changes what you hold onto. It changes what you value. It changes how you look at things. So much so that people will look at you and wonder. People will be

offended by you and what you say and what you believe. People might even want to throw you off . . . well, maybe not the pinnacle of the Temple, but off their social media, off their circle of friends, off the list of those honored and respected by the world. And maybe then also club you with their words and deeds. Because of Jesus. Because of your faith in Him. Because of your life in Him.

Count it all joy, my brothers (and sisters!), James wrote, ***when you meet trials of various kinds*** like these. When you meet trials in your life because of your faith in Jesus, because others see Jesus in you. That's a good thing! Though perhaps not an easy thing. Those trials are good for you. Strengthening you. Steadfasting you. And so, James goes on to say, ***Blessed is the man*** (and woman!) ***who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.***

Trials make us choose what to hang onto, what really matters. That's why they're good. Because we don't want to choose! We want to have it all. Or at least, we want to have it both ways. I want to be slim and in shape, but I don't want to exercise and I want to eat all I want. I want to be smart and knowledgeable but not study. I want to be successful but I don't want to work. Maybe those things happen sometimes, but those people are the unicorns, not the usual. But, you know, maybe I'll be one of those unicorns! Beat the odds!

But there are no unicorns in heaven. Jesus once famously said: *No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money* (Matthew 6:24). Or maybe better to say, you cannot serve both God and the things of this world. You cannot hang on to God and the things of this world. You cannot live for God and the things of this world. It's not that the things of this world are bad - they're not. Have them, use them, enjoy them. Give thanks to God for them. But do not live for them. Do not think you can love and be devoted to both them and God. Do not hang on to them so tightly that you let go of God.

Picture it like this: you're trying to hang onto *both [arms spread wide in opposite directions]*, but you can't. You have to let go of one to have the other. You have to choose. So which will it be? I know I shouldn't say this, but [*let go on one side*] . . . I know I shouldn't do this, but [*let go*] . . . I know this is what Scripture says, but [*let go*] . . . This is what I want, this is what I think, this is what I like, this is going to make my life better . . . Surely God wouldn't want me to suffer! God wouldn't want me not to have this! God wants me to be happy, doesn't He?

Well, God's not against happiness! But what He's really for is your eternal life. So if ***trials of various kinds*** help with that, help you turn to Him, hang onto Him, then trials it is. And as James said, we can ***count those times as joy***, knowing that they are not

purposeless or meaningless, but our heavenly Father working good for us.

One of those trials that not just James but the whole church was facing was what to do with Gentiles, as we heard in the reading from Acts, the account of the first Church Council, called in Jerusalem, to deal with this problem. For it was to the Hebrew people, the Jewish people, that God had promised the Saviour. It was to them that God had given the Promised Land. It was they that had the Temple, the priesthood, the sacrifices, the Scriptures. But they could not dispute what God was now doing among the Gentiles. ***Barnabas and Paul related the signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. Simeon*** (that is, Peter) ***related how God visited the Gentiles and took from them a people for his name***, made them believers. And it was James who also then pointed to the Scriptures, to the words of the prophets that said this would happen. So what to do? It *sounds* like an easy decision to us today, but it was anything but for them at that time. The church was under pressure, just as the church today is under pressure, and many of you are under pressure, to conform. To what will we cling? To what will you cling?

So it was, at just this time, that James found himself not only believing in his brother as the Messiah, but as the head of the church in Jerusalem. He had been put into an office he had, I'm sure, never even remotely dreamed he would be in, yet there he was. He who had faced various trials in his life, and would face more in the future, including one of life and death, was now leading the church through this trial. I'm sure they prayed for wisdom! as James also wrote about. And it was the wisdom of the Scriptures that prevailed. The church didn't try to make the Gentiles into Jews in order to make them Christians. The Holy Spirit had made them Christians, just as He had James. So the Jews let go of their separateness, and the Gentiles let go of their way of life among the pagans.

Then once the church made this decision, they chose and sent (or today we would say *called and ordained*) faithful men, to go with Paul and Barnabas to tell the church in Antioch. To preach and teach, to baptize and feed, to care for the church of God which Jesus purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28). And then the church in Antioch did the same. They chose and sent, called and ordained, more faithful men like Judas (not Iscariot!), Silas, and Mark, and sent them, too. To proclaim and give the Word, forgiveness, and life of Jesus to all.

And so it has been, from Jerusalem to Antioch to Rome to this church today. Faithful men, like James, ordained to service, to serve the church of God and the people of God who are going through trials and tribulations. Some great, some small. Some quick, some lasting. Some difficult, and some *very* much so. People stretched to the breaking point [*arms spread wide in opposite directions*] between God and the world, between heaven and hell. Some making bad choices. Some distressed, some filled with guilt, some doubting. Some who think all this not such a big deal and so need to be called to repentance, and others who cannot hear the word of forgiveness quickly enough or often

enough. People who need to be baptized, people who need to be brought back to their baptism and the wonderful promises made to them there, and all needing the feeding of the Body and Blood of Jesus, to nourish us and sustain us in this battle of life and faith. *These* are the ***mighty works*** Jesus is doing among us today. Healing us of the sickness of sin, giving us eyes to see His love, ears to hear His Word, mouths to confess His name, driving the evil one from us, and raising us to new life in Him. In Him, the carpenter's son, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joseph and Simon and Judas, living among us, speaking to us, and saving us.

So yeah, James of Jerusalem, brother of Jesus, is an unlikely believer, and an even more unlikely bishop and martyr. He didn't start out as any of that, yet the Holy Spirit worked that in Him and through Him. All gift. And you and me as well. That you're here, that you believe, all gift. The work of the Holy Spirit in you. And maybe this too: for some of you, pastor, and maybe for some of you, martyr. Those are gifts, too. To lay down your life for the confession of Christ.

But however it turns out for you and me, this is our calling now: to let go of this world and cling to Christ. To repent of when we don't, and receive His forgiveness. To open our mouths to confess His name and also to feed on His Body and Blood. And to look to Him in all our trials. For they will come, count on it. And they may be severe. But you have this promise and assurance, that ***Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.***

As it was for James, may it be so also for you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.