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The Book of

Session Eleven:
December 7, 2004

James 4:13-17—“...And the Creek Don’t Rise”

❖The Text (NRSV)

¹³Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.” ¹⁴Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵Instead, you ought to say, “If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.” ¹⁶As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. ¹⁷Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.

❖What’s going on here?

-v.13-14—The chapter seems to abruptly change gears yet again. 4:11-12 had left off with James’ words against those who stood in condemnation over others. Ultimately, James’ concern had been that judging another person puts oneself in the place of God, who alone is the “one lawgiver and judge.” This concern—trying to take the place of God—is the thread of continuity into this new section. James is still strongly critical of all the ways we play God, and now his attention is turned to the ways we pretend to be in control over the future.

In these verses, James seems to be addressing specific people, or at least he has a real life situation in mind, namely, the activities and trade of merchants. But his point is applicable to people in all walks of life and all kinds of professions, and James wants to expose all the ways that we pretend to be the masters of our own destinies. So as we hear James speak critically of those who plan to make money and busy and sell in “such and such a town,” we need to hear that as his primary point for now. He is not opposed to their particular business, nor is he upset (at least here) that they are making money in the first place—although in just a few verses, James will open fire again on the ways of life that are consumed with wealth. Rather,

here in 4:13-14, James is upset that these people are putting themselves in the place of God by the way they speak and act. They presume that what they plan will come to pass simply because they plan it.

In response, James uses an image common both to Jewish writing and Greco-Roman philosophy—humans “are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” James has already used similar language to describe the end of material wealth—back in 1:10-11, he talked about the rich disappearing like the wilting flower and scorched grass of the field. Here, he doesn’t seem to be directly attacking wealthy people (although that concern of wealth turning us in on ourselves is in the background). Rather, James is highlighting the contingent, transitory quality of human life. It is ephemeral, fleeting, like breath or vapor that vanishes in a moment.

This is not to say that human life is *bad per se*, just because it is short and tenuous. In fact, one almost gets the sense that James wants us to see how precious life is because it is so fleeting and fragile. And to pretend that I can control where I will be in a year or what I will do in some sense cheapens that preciousness. Beyond that, it puts me in the place of control, just as judging my neighbor (in 4:11-12) is a way for me to take the control I crave.

This is also not to say that it is inherently wrong to make plans of any kind or that we should live in a perpetual state of paranoia about what disaster might befall us now. James’ intent is not to be the eternal pessimist, but rather the faithful realist—for him, and indeed for the whole Hebrew way of thinking, human life is as precious and tenuous as breath or mist. And our attempts to plan or control life are as foolhardy and pointless as trying to hold your breath—forever.

-v.15—As a corrective to the overly self-confident attitude expressed in 4:13-14, James suggests that we need to rethink how we speak and act about the

future. As we plan and live our lives, we can never box God out, James says—God remains in control over the universe, and especially as the people of God, we understand ourselves (at our best moments) to be under the Reign of this same God. The response of faith is not a crippling fear that God is out to sabotage my plans, but to recognize that all my best-laid plans and schemes are always subject to the will and direction of God. To preface our plans with the statement, “If the Lord wishes,” is to acknowledge who is God and who is not (namely me).

Now, this kind of statement, too, can be misunderstood—James’ statement is fuller than our common expression, “Good Lord willing, and the creek don’t rise,” that becomes a throwaway sentiment. James intends us to let our speech (and so also our belief and action) be shaped by a radical humility and a realization that none of us gets the last say on anything—God always gets the last say. God got the last say in 4:11-12 in terms of standing in judgment, and God gets the last say in terms of the outcome of our own stories and indeed, all of creation’s story. At the same time, James wants us to see that as we let go of control of the future, we are opened to the gift of the present. Notice how James says we should qualify what we say: “If the Lord wishes, *we will live* and do this or that.” James, using a Semitic/Hebrew way of speaking, calls attention to the dependent quality of life in itself. Even before any talk of whether my ten-year plan for life (with a two-car garage and a white picket fence) will come to fruition, I am first called to recognize life in and of itself as a gift. Even my life is not mine, is not absolutely secure. Life itself is breath—and because of that we can do no other but to recognize that control over life rests in the hands of the One who first breathed life into us. That is humbling, but it is also profoundly freeing.

-v.-16-17—In these last verses, James gets at a major underlying concern for the whole chapter—the many faces of human pretense. James calls the boasting of 4:13 “arrogant” and “evil,” because it attempts to put ourselves in the place of God. But throughout the whole chapter, he has been exposing all sorts of ways that we try to place ourselves above ourselves—whether it is taking God’s place yet again by condemning our neighbors (whom we are called to love by the one who truly is God), or whether it is treating others simply as means to get to our desired ends and to satisfy our own “cravings” (4:1). And in all of these situations, James has offered faithful humility as a freeing alternative. Humility for James does not involve beating ourselves up or self-deprecation, but being fully and freely who we really are—no more and no less. When we are able to live in our right and rightful place within creation—as fellow human beings rather than people competing for the place of God—we are opened instead to cherish the life we have been given already and to the action of God to “exalt” what has been humbled.

The hope for James is that after he has spent so much of chapter four (and of the whole book, really), his readers and hearers will see the places in their own lives where they are not living within and under the Reign of God and then be led back into it again more fully. The flip-side, however, is what James says in 4:17—now that the sin has been named, we *are* called to turn from it. And for James, this disconnect between what we know to be right and how we then act is one of the tragic flaws and broken places of our humanity. And all too often, we become comfortable enough with that deep disconnect within ourselves not to do anything about it—so here once again, James calls a spade a spade and names sin for what it is. But the point of exposing our pretenses and ambitions as the idolatries they are is not just so that we’ll feel bad, but so that we will be led to turn back to the ever-open arms of God and will be led to love each other and God in humility.

Connections: Don't Hold Your Breath

-James is especially concerned about the ways we plan for the future (and especially, the ways we pretend to be in control of it). Jesus, too, tells us not to “worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own” (Matt. 6:34). Why do we have trouble with these invitations? Is there ever a time when it is appropriate to plan for the future? What makes the difference?

-What might it look like if we took James' words more seriously and let the future remain more clearly in God's hands? What effects might it have on a congregation—on its budgeting, on its ministries, on the mindset of its peoples?

-What dangers might there be in a “no worries about the future” approach to life as individuals or communities? How does responsibility relate to this?

James 5:1-6—Isn't It Ironic?

❖The Text (NRSV)

5:1 Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. 2 Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. 3 Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. 4 Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. 5 You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.

❖What's going on here?

-v.1-3—Yet again, we have a rather abrupt transition. But here, as in 4:13, the passage begins with an address, “Come now,” and then an address to a specific group. And as before, while James may have a particular set of real people in mind (here seemingly wealthy farmers or landowners) his point certainly

speaks to people of every time and vocation. Yet again (actually for the last time in the whole document), James unleashes his critical speech on the wealthy people in his community who have exploited the poor in the process of amassing riches for themselves. And he does so in a way that has great rhetorical force—he echoes the funeral dirge style of several Old Testament prophets. Addressing people who still have great wealth and have stored up material treasures for themselves, he describes these possessions as *already* wasted and rotten. He calls for weeping and wailing for the coming miseries as though they were already upon them. And he does so with the intent of driving them to see their luxurious indifference to others as a grievous sin against God and then to move to change.

But before that repentance can come, James has to undermine the security these people have placed in their possessions, wealth, and status, and he does so with great skill. His language and tone are especially reminiscent of the prophet Amos (see especially Amos 4-6) who mourns and laments the destruction of Israel in advance on account of the ways the wealthy have oppressed the needy. And like Amos, James exposes the irony of storing up treasures that will at best waste away to nothingness and at worst will destroy those who hoard them. For that matter, James' description of fine clothes being eaten by moths and precious metals being lost or destroyed echo Jesus' teaching about storing up treasure in heaven (Matt. 6:19-21). With a little poetic license, James goes even further, imagining gold and silver rusting, and then the rust consuming not only the metals but the hoarders themselves. James intends this vivid language to jar and shock his readers, especially those who are the wealthy ones, so he heightens the irony as much as possible. The ones who truly need to wail and lament are not the poor who are lacking in material goods, but the rich who only have for themselves their possessions, which will ultimately destroy them.

-v.4-6—Again, the language is very powerful and full of sensory images, much as in the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures who wrote against social injustices. James depicts the cries of the exploited as reaching “the ears of the Lord of hosts,” and leads us to believe that God will take action on their behalf.

Once again, this leads us to ask the question of what James thinks about the wealthy people he is addressing—are they part of the Christian community? Does he see them as beyond the reach of God’s grace and mercy? And yet again, James doesn’t give us a very clear answer. He doesn’t talk about a hope for mercy for these rich people very much, and he gives very little indication that they are members of the Christian community (except that he *is* directly addressing them, and it’s hard to imagine who else would listen to James other than fellow members of the Christian community). But in some sense, we shouldn’t expect James to spend much time talking about restoration for these wealthy, since it would undermine the rhetorical effect of what he has to say. James does not want talk of God’s mercy and compassion (which James readily upholds—see 5:11, especially) to become an excuse for complacency.

Even the prophets like Amos, who *do* eventually get to the promise of God’s restoration, only do so after it is clear that God does not wink at injustice against others. Like Amos, James uses the image of fattening cows to suggest the irony of the fate of these wealthy people and to show how their own actions become their undoing. “You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter,” he says, echoing Amos 4:1ff who calls the wealthy elite of Israel “cows of Bashan.” The image of fattening implies that they are being fattened up for slaughter—the wealthy feel comfortable in their luxury, but it is in fact the cause of their undoing. The title James uses for God here is significant, too—the one who hears the cries of the oppressed ones is “the Lord of hosts.” James has borrowed a Hebrew phrase and title that means something like, “YHWH, the God

of (many) armies.” Throughout the Old Testament, the title is used to convey God’s power and transcendence. But oddly enough, it is also used especially in conjunction with how this mighty God comes to the aid of those in need and those who are made victims. By conjuring up images of God as the one who is both supremely powerful and who chooses to use that power in defense of the weak, James jars those wealthy people in his audience to think about how they are aligning themselves against God by their exploitation of their workers. James wants it to be clear that God cares about how we use our resources and cares about the lives of *all* people.

Connections: “Where Your Treasure Is...”

-Desmond Tutu is quoted as saying, “When the elephant has his foot on the tail of the mouse, and you say you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.” We may be uncomfortable with talk of God taking the side of the poor (especially as people who live in relative comfort), so we may prefer to think of God being neutral about how we use our possessions. Can God be neutral? Even if we hold that God loves *all* people and all creation (and we do indeed hold that), what does that love look like when people are being taken advantage of? Is love the same thing as tolerance of injustice or of sin? Why or why not?

-At the same time, it is easy to get fired up behind James or Amos or Bishop Tutu in the cause of “justice.” But what precisely does “justice” mean? Are the poor always “just” and the rich always “unjust”? Is justice a question of equal opportunity? Equal provision for needs? Something else? How do you know?

-Is justice always a black-and-white issue? Are there shades of grey when it comes to what is “just” and what is “unjust”? How can compromise be a part of the real life practice of justice in a community or government?