

WGUMC September 23, 2012 "Rich in Faith"
James 4:13-5:11

My daughter hates it when I predict what she's going to do or say. Sometimes she says, "You know me too well." Parents are like that. So is the Bible. It knows us too well. The Letter of James knows things about us that we wish it didn't know.

For one thing, the author knows all about the world we live in, and it doesn't look much like the world God wants us to live in. We live in a me-first world. I look to my own interests. I do my own thing. I make my own way. I say, "Today or tomorrow, [I] will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." [James 4:13] And in my self-satisfaction, I tell myself that because I'm going to do what I want to do regardless, I don't really need you. Then I think, "Wait a minute. I can't be on the top unless someone like you is on the bottom, so I guess I do need you. I need you to

serve me, fear me, revere me." Of course, we don't talk that way, but far too often the world works that way.

It's a pretty harsh world, because it's ruled by what James calls, "earthly wisdom." We heard about it last week in Chapter 3. You'll find it wherever you find envy, selfish ambition, boasting, and being false to the truth. And what do we end up with? He says, "disorder and wickedness of every kind." [James 3:14-16]

By contrast, God's world looks altogether different. In God's world, we all have the mind of Christ. So, in humility, we regard others as better than ourselves. And we look first to their interests, not our own. [Philippians 2:3-4] In God's world, we not only think like Jesus, we act like Jesus. We turn the other cheek, go the second mile, love our enemies, and pray for our persecutors. [Matthew 5] In God's world, it's the meek who inherit the earth, and the poor, the kingdom of heaven. [Matthew 5:3,5]

In God's world, we live by an entirely different logic. We live by the wisdom from above, which James tells us is "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." [James 3:17]

James paints these two worlds in such stark terms, because he wants us to leave the one and live in the other. But it's not so simple, because almost all of us are living in both worlds at the same time. Living in two worlds is like serving two gods, and they are always at odds.

The folks in James' congregation were trying to live in two worlds and they were fighting each other. There were conflicts and disputes going on. So, he asks them, "Where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?" [James 4:1]

You see, James understands that all the conflicts out there start as a conflict in here. Reminds me of the Cherokee

story about an old man and his grandson. One day, the old man told the young boy that there is a battle going on inside of all people. It's a battle between two wolves. One of the wolves is evil. It is full of anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, lies, false pride, and ego. The other wolf is good. It is full of joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith. The grandson thought about this battle for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf wins?" His grandfather looked at him and said, "The one that you feed."

James wants us to feed the good wolf. He wants us to live in God's world. For we'll never be at peace as long as we think we can live well in both worlds. He says, "whoever wants to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." [James 4:4]

I don't want to be God's enemy. You don't want to be God's enemy. So, we're going to have to talk about money. There's an elephant in the living room of this letter, and it is James' words about wealth. We find them in every chapter, and so far in this series, I've been avoiding them, because I don't want to stir up those wolves inside me.

We all know that the problem with money is that we think it will solve problems. We endow it with god-like powers. It seems to work so well for us that even though it comes with its very own warning label—*In God* we trust—we still put our trust in money.

The Word of God has more power than words printed on green paper. Proverbs says, "Those who trust in their riches will wither, but the righteous will flourish like green leaves."

[Proverbs 11:28] Jesus says, "You cannot serve God and wealth." [Luke 16:13] And he warns us not to be like those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward

God. [Luke 12:21] He says, "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." [Luke 6:24]

The author of James takes the rhetorical cake: "Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire." [James 5:1-3a] I tell you, this letter needs a warning label!

But maybe if a few more had read it, we wouldn't have suffered so much in this recession. Apparently, too many people put their trust in bubbles and banks, in paper wealth and Wall Street. Meanwhile, in the words of James, Chapter Five, a few "lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure" and "fattened [their] hearts in a day of slaughter." Then the miseries came, but they came not to the rich but to the poor and middle class. Jobs withered away. Pensions rotted. Mortgages were moth-eaten. All that wealth rusted and the

wreckage is the evidence against us. Then the worry, the anxiety and the anger started eating our flesh like fire. Is it any wonder that the minimum-wage laborers who work in this city are crying out? Won't their cries reach the ears of the Lord of hosts? [James 5:1-5, NRSV] There's no doubt about it: God's Word is still telling it like it is in our world.

We all pray the worst is over. And if we've done our penance, if we're paying down our debts, it's time to turn the page. We need to hear the promise. James says, "Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and late rains. You must also be patient." [James 5:7-8a]

The farmers living in the Dust Bowl waited and waited and waited for the rains to come. Ten years they waited. Almost five years we've been waiting for relief from the recession to come. What have we learned in those five years? If we've lost

enough, I hope we've learned that we can't put our trust in money or markets. If we've suffered enough, we've learned that there are a lot more important things in life than things. If we've prayed enough, we've learned that it's far better to be rich in faith.

The precious crop we are waiting for isn't a cash crop. What we're waiting for is a harvest of righteousness. We are trees in God's orchard, and, yes, we've been severely pruned. But the Master Gardener is coming to take away what is dead and diseased, so we can yield abundant fruit once again. Maybe you have a new job or you're making a new start. Maybe the late rains have come and your spiritual life is beginning to ripen. Maybe you are realizing for the first time that you've been growing precious fruit all along and it's ready to be harvested.

As I sat at our goal-setting workshop on Wednesday night, I thought: I am hopeful about this year's harvest. Despite all the financial hardship of the past few years, we got through

the summer. We made payroll. We paid all our bills. All of our designated funds are covered. As of the end of August, we were 2/3 of the way through the year and had paid 62% of our apportionments. Praise God! So, yes, I am hopeful, because we're still here, and we're aiming first to be rich in faith and we "have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful." [James 5:11] God is good!