

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, 8/29/2021, James 1:17-27, Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
(*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Today our Old Testament stories shift from stories about the kings of Israel to wisdom literature, but instead of focusing on the Song of Solomon today, I feel called to take a look at the epistle of James. And you all know it probably takes the Holy Spirit full-on shouting to get me to preach on one of the epistles. I prefer stories and poems to letters and sermons.

I feel a little like the Holy Spirit is rubbing my nose in this epistle because of the emphasis on listening. Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.

We need these words today, in a time when we have stopped listening to each other and instead raise our voices. We aren't slow to speak: we're quick to interject our opinion as soon as the trace of a topic comes up. We're angry about world events. Some are angry at the president because of the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and the lives lost in Thursday's bombing. Others are angry that the president is getting blamed. Others are angry that this distracts from their agenda. All this anger means no one is listening to the desperate people in Afghanistan or those who mourn their dead.

Anger often masks fear, and there's much to fear right now, like the hurricane on its way to Louisiana today. Anger about devastation in Haiti following the recent earthquake may also mask fear.

I've preached before that we are entitled to our feelings, including anger, and we are. We are. But we jump to outrage pretty fast these days. Why is this person wearing a mask in this place at this time? Or why isn't this person wearing a mask in this place at this time? Why are we mandating this? Why aren't we mandating that?

We can't escape from any of this right now. I am supposed to leave at 5:50 in the morning Tuesday and I am afraid that I won't get to, or that I will get to but will get sick on the plane and then get stuck, or that I will return and all will be physically well but I won't have relaxed the entire time because I was too worried about potentially contracting or spreading something.

The author of the letter of James—some believe this James was Jesus' brother, while others insist it was someone who admired Jesus' brother so attributed the letter to him—this "James" was writing to Jews who had been scattered after the burning of the Second Temple.

Last Sunday we just talked about King Solomon blessing the first temple built in the kingdom. Eventually, remember, Israel and Judah divided, and Israel fell first, then Judah. When Jerusalem fell, the Babylonians destroyed the temple, and the people of God went into exile in Babylon. They were brought back under King Cyrus and built a second great temple, the one that Jesus knew. But that temple was destroyed by the Romans not too long after Jesus' death, and the people were scattered.

James addresses some of the scattered in this missive. It's a letter and a sermon to people who loved Jesus and the Jewish scriptures.

James tells them to be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.

What would our life look like today if we practiced that?

Listening may sound passive but listening deeply to another person is hard. When I was being trained as a chaplain, we had to practice “active listening.” Listening to another person, and then carefully summing up what they were saying and repeat it back to them: not judging or commenting or offering our own opinion, but trying to understand, to let them know that they had been heard.

Trying to understand another person’s viewpoint is one of my most effective ways of diffusing my own anger. One personal example would be a conversation I had with Ron Dale, a beloved member here who died four and a half years ago. Ron and I disagreed on many man things, and one such issue was same-gender marriage. He said to me once, “I feel like if we do this, everything I’ve ever been taught is a lie.”

My inclination was to rush to reassure him as well as explain my point of view, but really listening to him and staying with his perspective raised a curtain for me. I thought about what it would feel like if things people I loved had taught me were a lie. This was deeply painful. Sitting in that pain was not enjoyable, and my own viewpoint was not changed, but I felt closer to Ron. I was able to hear him. I still disagreed with him but heard him.

We may know that we have finally heard someone when we are able to articulate their different point of view. Now, we have so many lawyers (and lawyers to be) in this congregation that may not seem fair, because they can argue any point of view; but listening deeply—not arguing, but listening, and then affirming the others’ viewpoint, does seem to be what James implores his listeners to do. Not to be able to just argue the others’ point, but to *feel* it.

Now these people weren’t sitting in a congregation or tuning into a livestream like we are now, secure in their homes or their church, among their neighbors. These people had been forcibly scattered—driven from their homes—after their place of worship was burned. They were disoriented. Traumatized. Yet they were being told to listen. To be slow to speak. Slow to anger. Going through difficult times does not absolve us from needing to listen.

James doesn’t stop with the listening, though. Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers. Now, this is not a novel idea; we hear traces of it in today’s Gospel, when Jesus is quoting Isaiah, saying this people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”

No wonder this epistle irritated the reformer Martin Luther so much. It calls us to action. We must listen to the word, which has, James claims, “the power to save our souls.” We are called to listen, to be slow to speak, slow to anger.

And then we are called to act.

As the pandemic lingers on and on, as the situation in Afghanistan worsens, as a hurricane rushes toward Louisiana, we may not feel like we can act. We may feel trapped. But are we really? What does action look like?

Who aren’t you listening to? What is their point that you are failing to hear? How are you being called to act on your faith today?