

The Book of James: Ancient Wisdom For Right now

James 2.14-26, "Flesh it Out", May 24, 2020

Why so much drama?

Not too long ago I remember getting so angry that I threw my road bike in a ditch. It's a long story for another time; but another story goes that Martin Luther, who helped kick off the Reformation in the 16th century, once got so angry reading this bit of James that he tore this page out of his Bible and threw it in a river. Why so much drama? The big question Luther asked was: *is James suggesting that that we earn God's favour through the stuff we do?* Turns out that was the wrong question.

Now, a few hundred years later, we can see that James isn't making an argument for earning God's favour by how good a life we live. He isn't telling us we've got to work our way to heaven, but reminding us of Jesus' preoccupation with *bringing heaven to earth*. Once again James sounds a lot like Jesus. Jesus teaches his disciples to pray "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven", and James is inspiring his listeners to simply *flesh out* that prayer.

There are two thoughts that stand out to me when reading this bit of James. First, *a life of faith is as much about substance as it is about transcendence*, and second, *a substantial life of faith is filled with ordinary offerings*.

A life of faith is as much about substance as it is about transcendence.

Every now and then when I'm at home with my family I have a tendency of floating away. I'll be sitting at dinner and my eyes will glaze over as I stare off into some distant space, forgetting I'm even in the room. My mind wanders and my attention follows. Eventually I'll come back, and my wife Sarah will gently ask "so, where did you go?", and I'll apologize and fill her in on my little journey.

It can be easy to assume that a life of faith must be like that, that faith in God is about floating off, a kind of transcended state of being, a life of happy little vacations in high up spaces. We could think about a life of faith as if it's a life *somewhere else*. And if life doesn't feel floaty, dreamlike or lofty, we might assume something must be wrong. James confronts that assumption by saying that *God's not floaty*. In fact, if Jesus' life shows us anything, a life of faith is really quite grounded. That's what James is aiming at. Knowing God isn't about mental ascent (thinking the perfect thoughts) or retreat from the real world or bending ourselves into some never-ending emotional gymnastic routine. Perhaps most importantly James tells us that knowing God isn't just about lip service - which is hard to hear for those of us who like to talk. James says that knowing God is a life of *substance* where we should expect to get the dirt of the earth under our fingernails, the scent of our neighbour on our couch, to find the needs of the needy at the top of our to-do lists; it's living and working with God in the here and now - on earth as it is in heaven.

This week the Church around the world remembers and celebrates Jesus' ascension. We read in the gospels that Jesus' returned to the one he called Father after his resurrection, but sent his Spirit to help us share God's love today. Jesus may have ascended, but we are very much *here* to *flesh out* heaven as Jesus did.

So, the real question James is asking in this bit of the book is, *what good is heaven if it doesn't touch earth?* Thoughts, dreams, intentions, words alone fall short. A genuine life of faith is filled with the substance of God's activity, riddled with the evidence of God's love. And if we can't see Jesus' fingerprints on the people and places we touch, if we socially distance our hearts from our local and global fellow human, James says, we're not really living in the Jesus story - because God is anything but distant from us.

Growing up in the public-school system I was always told to dream big. One banner over a classroom chalkboard read, "Shoot for the moon, even if you miss,

you'll land among the stars". Those words helped to ignite my imagination, for which I'm thankful as imagining what's possible is big part of our faith, but so is simple action. As someone with a tendency of being a little wordy and floaty, sometimes I could do with a little less dreaming and little more doing. "Live large, man, and dream small." (R.S. Thomas on the simple, meaningful life of a farmer). Don't worry about where you're not, enjoy filling up the space where you are. A life of faith is as much about substance as it is about transcendence.

A substantial life of faith is filled with *ordinary* offerings.

One of my favourite writers says that we're being genuinely Christian when we're simply "putting others in touch with God" with every interaction (Rowan Williams).

That's also a great description of Jesus. So, before we get any delusions of grandeur, thinking that a substantial life needs to be a *showy* life, we should ask ourselves, how *showy* was Jesus, how did Jesus put others in touch with God? Jesus often told people to keep his miracles a secret, he paid attention to the people most ignored, in the gospel accounts even his resurrection reads a little under the radar. So, is the genuine activity of God bombastic or showy, or does it usually look humble, even ordinary?

Some of us are feeling restricted and stifled during this pandemic. What about our plans, what about our goals, what about the impressive life we were building or were about to start to think about maybe building? What about all the great stuff I wanted to do, all the great people I was going to meet, the great places I was going to go? What if none of it happens? Will my life have any substance? Will my life matter? The wisdom from James here, rooted in the teachings of Jesus, says that our lives have the potential to be *more substantial* the simpler, the more ordinary, they become, so long as they're infused with the love of God. When we simplify, filling up

the space where we are, rather than daydreaming about where we are not, our delusions of grandeur often fade, and we can affect what's right in front of us. What chore can we do? What neighbour can we listen to and encourage? What prayer can we pray to open up to God's nearness and compassion?

James gives us two Old Testament examples of famous characters. The great Abraham, who didn't start out great, just started with a step out of his city and into a life of trust and follow through. And Rahab, a woman remembered in Israel's history by one simple action of helping people in danger escape from a sticky situation. These are the unassuming and humble examples James shares.

Our church family is humble and generous. We like planting seeds in Uganda. Just this week our pastoral team heard about our women's prison ministry team. They can't go into the prison right now, so they're writing encouraging notes to the correctional officers and the inmates alike. They're fleshing out on paper the love of God as best they can. A life of substance is filled with ordinary offerings. *That* kind of life can add up to more than we could *imagine*.

Learning to breath

James sums things up with another modest but evocative picture, "just as the body is dead without breath, so faith is dead without good works".

A few months ago, I visited a massage therapist to help with some back problems I was having. He did good work, but what I heard him emphasize the most was the importance of breathing. He said "We don't breathe very well these days. We're hunched over computers, always in front of screens. We've got to remember to sit back or stand up and to take deep breaths rather than shallow breathes. We'd all be in a lot better shape if we learned to breathe like we were made to." At the very end of the visit he said, "I'm going to give you some instructions of things you can do

at home to help.” He wrote a few things on a piece of paper and handed it to me. All he had written were three words: *breathe, breathe, breathe.*

I’m not sure that a life of faith has to be as complicated as we sometimes make it. We’re designed to love substantially but simply, just like we’re designed to breathe. I think a life of faith, a life of love, can come as natural as breathing if we just let it. So a closing question is this: Where are we taking inconsistent, shallow breaths, and where is God inviting us to breathe routinely and deeply, by fleshing out ordinary love where we find ourselves right now?

Hug your partner in the kitchen. Plant some beans in Uganda. Ask your neighbour a second question and listen carefully. Forget about buying another self-help book on Amazon you’ll never read and give the money to a food bank instead. And if you find your life filled with ordinary offerings, don’t be fooled into thinking that your life isn’t counting for something. The fingerprints of God are all over it. *We have a faith, dear brothers and sisters; may we keep fleshing it out with simplify and love.*

Discussion Questions:

- What’s a common misconception about a life of faith is that you have found yourself falling into?
- What is the most loving and ordinary thing you’ve seen someone do?
- Why is ordinary love in action so meaningful and powerful?
- What are some ways you’d like to live more simply and lovingly?