

## **THE UNCHANGEABLENESS OF GOD**

**JAMES 1:17-21**

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We are taking a detour from the lectionary today. I want to use the Epistle of James as our text because it speaks, I think, to our situation.

Just a minute ago we heard Chris Greene talk about the letter mailed Friday to your homes and inserted in today's bulletin. When someone suggested we label those envelopes "Urgent" I did not object because these are urgent times that require an urgent message and urgent action.

It may be good, for starters, to remember these are not the only urgent times Buffalo and the nation have faced. In the 1870s, 80s, and 90s financial panics rocked this city and a society struggling to recover from the ravages of civil war.

During those years and into the new century deep-seated fear of anarchy was the equivalent of our fear of terrorism. In fact, the headline the day after President McKinley was shot here in Buffalo claimed that the assassination was the work of an anarchist – who turned out to be a disgruntled, disturbed Eastern European factory worker from Cleveland.

Labor strikes were common. Overworked, underpaid, immigrant employees of America's heavy industry often erupted into full-fledged street riots. Armed battle between workers and police or Pinkerton militia are still remembered: Chicago's Haymarket Sq. riot; Bethlehem Steel's 1893 siege; Carnegie Steel's three-day shoot-out in Homestead, Pennsylvania.

While this is history and may sound long ago and far away, I want to remind us that our ancestors who sat in these very pews brought their hopes and fears about their troubling times into this sanctuary just as we bring ours today.

As an armchair student of Buffalo's architecture I became fascinated a few years ago with the H.H. Richardson Towers at the north end of Richmond Ave. – once referred to as the most beautiful building in America.

It occurred to me that these exquisite towers were constructed at precisely this time we're talking about when many thought the world was falling apart and by every measure—social, political and economic—the future held only darkness and gloom.

What intrigues me when I look at Richardson's Towers are their solemnity and stability and what must have been a striking contrast to the teetering world around them.

As I got to know Richardson and his towers, I learned that he was one of America's great church architects and used, in his Buffalo landmark, repeating themes of circles, triangles and squares from Romanesque buildings of the Middle Ages – also a time of social, political and economic turmoil – to convey eternal truths and constancy.

What Richardson was saying is this: "although times change and crises brew, the world is not falling apart. Trust the eternal verities. God is unchangeable."

Which, of course, is exactly what the Epistle of James tells us today. This letter was addressed to the church between the second and third generations in its infant life.

Talk about harsh times. Receptivity to followers of Jesus was hostile at best and murderous more often than not. This was the age of the martyrs. The benchmark for being a Christian was your willingness to give your life away in martyrdom.

“Are you willing to die with Christ?” was not a rhetorical question. Those who chose to follow Jesus died with Jesus. The symbols across the great Roman arch of this chancel are reminders of those martyrs and the gruesome means by which they were put to death. But we are also reminded of their courage and commitment. The empty cross at the top, in place of what would have been the sign of Caesar, is the sign of their true security—Christ’s glorious resurrection from the tomb.

You see, James was concerned about that infant church because there were reports that God’s people, Jesus’ followers, were crumbling under the stress and strain of the age. They were breaking apart into factions, they were spreading bitter rumors about one another, and they’d let their ministry to the poor, orphaned, and widowed languish.

In other words they were self-destructing. So James reminds them that though the world is unpredictable, the One who made them is constant and unchanging. And this: God’s purpose is extended in and through us. The source of our generosity and every perfect gift is God. We who are fortunate to have heard the Gospel and are called to share and spread God’s word to a broken and fearful world are incomplete until God’s life flows through us in acts of service and generosity. It is why and how we were made.

Turn away, he says, from loose talk, resentment, and anger which cannot convey God’s new life. But quietly accept the message planted in our hearts, which brings salvation.

That’s a powerful message in any age but especially in times of turmoil because what James is saying is to look not outside of us, but inside of us—into our very hearts and conscience—for the truth that brings hope and new life.

In other words, look to the image of God in which your heart is shaped. This image that defines us never changes. The image of God within us never tarnishes or wears away, though we waver through our days. The image in which we are made is our salvation if we return to it and let it guide us through our doubts and uncertainties to be constant as God is constant in our ministry to the world.

You see, James was calling the early church back to life. When I think of a world in crisis and God’s messengers I think all the way back to Noah—that very human witness.

Noah, whose age was so sinful God repented of having begun the human family in the first place; then proceeds to send a flood that wipes out everything and everyone; only later to promise “never again” when the waters drew back and faithful Noah and his family stepped ashore.

While Noah ignored the ridicule and rebellion of his time he acted upon God’s calling him to build an ark and rescue a remnant who would start again. Though everything and everyone contradicted him, Noah’s trust that God would be constant was the very rib and foundation of that ark.

When I think back about God's messengers in times of crisis I think, this week, of Governor William Bradford and the founders of Plymouth Plantation. They were among the first arrivals to these inhospitable shores in 1620—sea-weary and weather-beaten, half the number that started out, riddled with sickness and disease, depleted of supplies, outnumbered by a native population, huddled in the harsh New England winter.

It is their record which inspires our Thanksgiving holiday today. These 17<sup>th</sup> century followers of Jesus who decided when they set foot here not to complain or revolt or head back to the king and country, but to give thanks to God and to establish a covenant with God that is in the spiritual DNA of this nation and continues to distinguish America for its generosity and open door.

Who would have expected such a battered gathering to fall to their knees in gratitude? It is a testimony to the vitality and resilience of their faith and trust that God is as constant as the mountains of the new world they now called home. This trust became the very spiritual stone and clapboard of their soon-to-be-erected towns and villages.

And when I think of harsh circumstances and faithful followers of Jesus I think certainly of Jesse Ketchum and the founders of this church. In the years just before the Civil War and long before Buffalo's affluent future they built this sanctuary in which we sit today.

Built with stone and glass perhaps but really they built this place with their trust that through war and financial panic the God who called them to erect these walls would continue to enable them in good times and bad to be a beacon to this city.

They believed God would never desert them in their mission to Buffalo because, my hunch is, they looked into their hearts—rather than to their tumultuous times—and they discovered that unchanging image of God which was the source of their generosity and service.

In no way do I mean to diminish the gravity of our circumstances as a world or nation or church by remembering that others have negotiated difficult times as well. I do want to remember and honor what carried them through as we make choices for our future.

It is an auspicious day to be observing a tenth anniversary. Ten years ago when I accepted the call to this pastorate and came to Buffalo I did not imagine facing the circumstances we are in today. The magnitude of our deficit is historic. Our reliance on invested funds and upon the false notion that some deep-pocketed member will bail us out of hard times is an old demon that still haunts us. A demon we must exorcise before it consumes the vitality of our ministry and prevents us from serving God.

I am convinced there is a vast gap between the pews and the committees who struggle with fewer and fewer resources to sustain our mission. But I am equally convinced that if we can bridge that divide, if every member of this church can understand the challenge before us, we will be on our way to transforming this congregation.

In the near future we will have the tender task of saying good bye to our associate pastor Elena Delgado and closing that position because it cannot be supported at the current level of our giving.

Wall St. got us to this point but I do not believe for a minute that we need Wall St. to bail us out. A member by member, family by family, house by house stewardship gift from the heart would replenish our curtailed and cut back ministries.

If ever there was a time to erect a Christian community on the spiritual landscape of this city with our trust that the God who made us in his own image and stood by our ancestors and stands by us – it is now.

Noah and Governor Bradford and our founder Jesse Ketchum found in their God-shaped hearts an endless source of generosity and hope. And God enabled them to reach out to their fearful and retreating generations. They lived their lives in ways that transcended human calculation and fear and they inspire us still.

One week from today we will celebrate five baptisms. This conversation is not just about us. It is about our children too. What will they use to guide them through the anxiety and unexpected crises they will be called upon to shoulder?

The unchangeable image of God within them is the best and only answer I can imagine. This moment is our opportunity to add our names to that list of heroes and saints and give our children an example to follow.

What better legacy? What higher responsibility? Amen.