

## Crossing the Divide for Creation

Welcome back! This is Ingathering Sunday, when we celebrate the return of our members from their summer travels and welcome newcomers who've joined us this year. Many of you had wonderful journeys over the summer, and I hope you'll stay for coffee after the service and share some of your favorite adventures. This is also the Sunday when we kick off the Season of Creation, which began in 1989 when the Eastern Orthodox Church designated September 1<sup>st</sup> as a day of prayer for God's Creation. That single day of prayer has grown into a full liturgical season, running through the Feast of St. Francis in October, as Episcopalians join our fellow Christians around the world to worship, pray and work together with special concern for what our Book of Common Prayer calls "this fragile Earth, our island home."

This year's theme is "to hope and act with Creation." That's no small order. As faithful stewards of God's magnificent world, we are called to remain hopeful even when faced with daunting circumstances. We are also called to act not on, but *with* Creation. We are not to decide unilaterally what the Earth needs and impose our will upon it. There's been far too much of that already. Rather, we are to listen to everything Creation is trying so hard to tell us, and then act with hope in collaboration with the Holy Spirit to transform and care for the world. Today's Gospel passage offers insights on how to do that. But before we turn to Jesus's adventures in Tyre and the Decapolis, let's talk about the Epistle of James.

This epistle will occupy us through September, so we should know what makes it worthy of its place in our canon. Let's tackle the uncertainties first. The author of this letter is identified as "James," but scholars aren't sure who he was. There are several "Jameses" in the Bible. One is James, "Son of Thunder" and brother to the beloved disciple, John. Close as this James was to Jesus, scholars agree that this epistle isn't his. Father Raymond E. Brown, a respected Catholic

theologian, believes the more likely author is “James the Just,” a devout Jew who served as the first Christian bishop of Jerusalem and also happened to be Jesus’s younger brother.

Much of what we know about this James comes from the apocrypha, a collection of contemporaneous writings that never made it into Scripture. They tell us that, although James didn't travel with Jesus during his three-year ministry, Jesus appeared to James after the Resurrection. Whatever happened between them, James then joined Peter to launch the Christian tradition in Jerusalem. James was widely respected as a holy and righteous man. Ultimately, he was martyred by the Temple authorities for spreading his big brother's message.

Many Bible scholars believe that James the Just didn't write this epistle because they can't imagine a Nazarene peasant commanding such elegant Greek. They also note that, although the author appears familiar with Jesus's teachings as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, he phrases them somewhat differently. Then, there's the disagreement between this letter and some of Paul's later writings about faith and works. Personally, I wonder if pride is clouding their vision. Some scholars argue that Jesus himself must have been illiterate. If Jesus was the Son of God – and if he wasn't, there's no reason for us to be here – that argument is absurd. If Jesus wanted to read, he could, and he could also have given James the ability to write in any language he chose. As for Jesus's teachings, perhaps James heard his brother preach and chose to convey Jesus's ideas in his own words. As for any disagreement with Paul, we have no idea how many letters of James or Paul have been lost or when they were written. James might well have heard that Paul was preaching salvation by faith alone and decided that some correction was in order.

We're focusing on the authenticity of this epistle because, canonical or not, it's come under pretty heavy fire. Martin Luther called it “an epistle of straw,” but we need to remember that Luther was an adamant advocate for salvation by faith alone. James' insistence that faith

without works is dead drove Luther straight up the wall, but many of us would agree with James. Just this week, we've seen again how little our "thoughts and prayers" do for those who lose their loved ones to school shootings. Faithful prayers are good, but prayers *and* works are better. And if we're going to tackle the unholy mess we've made of Creation, prayer will be essential but insufficient unless it's accompanied by a lot of hard, faithful effort. Whatever Luther thought of it, Father Brown correctly points out that the Epistle of James has inspired modern Christians to care for the needy and fight for social justice exactly as Jesus taught. Make your own decision about the authorship of this epistle. But if forced to choose between believing that it was written by some anonymous scribe or the righteous and devout brother of my beloved Messiah, I'm sticking with the brother until someone affirmatively proves me wrong.

Now, to the text. James urges his readers not to favor the rich in their congregations. Favoring the rich is one of those ugly problems, like racism, sexism, ageism, and all the other discriminatory "isms," that never quite die even though Jesus insisted that God chose the poor and, by extension, all those who are disadvantaged to be heirs to the Kingdom of Heaven. It's not that the historically advantaged aren't welcome in our churches. Our doors must be open to anyone who sincerely desires to join us in worship and fellowship. But, as James points out, those who enjoy society's unjust advantages have a nasty way of oppressing those who do not. Our churches must be safe havens for those who are disadvantaged if we are to live as Christ taught us. And they must also be safe settings for the difficult conversations that will have to happen if we are to join in God's work to repair our wounded world.

That leads us, at last, to our Gospel reading. If you were here last year for Matthew's version of Jesus's encounter with the Syrophenician woman, you know that I don't think Jesus meant the hurtful things he said to her. Tyre, Sidon and the Decapolis were all Gentile

communities. If Jesus was prejudiced against Gentiles, he wouldn't have crossed Israel's northern border to enter Tyre, and he certainly wouldn't have gone twenty-two miles further north to Sidon before turning around and traveling sixty miles southeast to the Decapolis. He walked about a hundred miles when there were plenty of people for him to heal back home. I believe Jesus insulted that woman to show the disciples how ugly their prejudices were. I also believe he went looking for her, and for the disabled man, to show his followers that faith sometimes requires us to reach out and engage with people whom we'd just as soon avoid.

In his commentary on this passage, Pope Francis observes that, "The lesson we can take from [Jesus traveling to the Decapolis and healing the disabled man] is that God ... *opens himself and places himself in communication* with humanity. In his immense mercy, he overcomes the abyss of the infinite difference between him and us, and he comes to meet us." If we are grateful that Jesus builds bridges between us and the Father, we can repay him by building better bridges of communication between ourselves and those with whom we disagree.

This Season of Creation calls us to action. Public opinion about the state of God's good Earth is deeply divided, though, which will make it hard for us to accomplish much. I recently spoke with a decent man who honestly believes that climate change is a natural process to which humankind contributes very little. Science says otherwise, but confronting this man with reams of data would only offend him. I'm not sure how to approach someone whose understanding of the world is so different from mine. But I think we need to figure it out, recognizing that it's likely to be harder than any of us might prefer. Jesus was willing to walk enormous distances to heal the Syrophenician woman's daughter and the disabled Gentile man. This Season of Creation, please join me in praying for Jesus's help to cross the political distances that divide us so that, together, we can work with the Holy Spirit to heal God's beautiful Creation. Amen.