

James 1:12-18
Lent 1B
February 18, 2018

“Journey Through Trials ... to the Kingdom of Heaven”

Grace, mercy and peace to you my brothers and sisters in Christ from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I can be rightly accused of not being the most observant guy sometimes. So I'm not going to blame anyone here today if they didn't notice some changes around us. Gone is the “green” ... symbolic of the growth and life of Christ's church by the power of the Holy Spirit. Here now is “purple” ... symbolic of the contempt and scorn Jesus endured as soldiers made Him wear royal purple robes during His trial ... at the same time, we know and worship Him as the true King of kings. In a subtle change, also gone are the “Gloria's” and “Alleluia's” of rejoicing and praise.

We've entered the season of Lent ... a 40-day journey where we strip back our lives in order to focus as intently as possible on our Lord and the journey He took throughout His life to save us from our sin and to redeem His creation through His life, suffering, death, and resurrection. His journey from birth to death is like ours in every way, except one ... sin. He never sinned.

James warns us about sin ... how it rises from our desires and Satan's temptations toward us to fill our desires. He says, (James 1:14-15) *“But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”* Desires are our ungodly cravings and lusts we inherit in our sinful nature. Satan uses our desires in His tempting ... which gives birth to sin. And full grown, unrepentant sin that rejects God's grace and mercy ... leads to death.

In contrast to desire, tempting, sin and death, James also tells of trials saying, (James 1:12) *“Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.”* Trials are many on

life's journey ... but they are different from temptations. Trials are times of difficulty and assaults from Satan ... seeing the suffering in the world, in loved ones, in ourselves ... seeing people get away with evil while seeming to prosper ... having to wait patiently for God to change things in our lives as we pray daily without seeming to see any affects. In faith, we steadfastly trust God to help us endure ... by fervent prayer, heartfelt worship, and devoted study of His Word. Having endured, these trials strengthen our faith in God and His promises. However, trials can become temptations ... if we give in to Satan's lies, turn away from God and His word, and pick Satan's way instead. But, by turning to God in our times of trial ... relying on Him and placing our trust only in Him, the Holy Spirit strengthens us to endure. He helps us pass by Satan's seductive exits. He keeps us on the Highway to Heaven and the crown of life.

I recently read a story about Vern, a man who seemed to be traveling the Highway to Heaven making a beeline for the crown of life. Dating back to the 1600s, many of the men in Vern's family, including his own dad, were pastors. He grew up the typical "preacher's kid." Attended church regularly, sang in choirs, went to Sunday School, was confirmed, and even went to the denominational college in the Midwest. But, he never heard the call his father heard. Over the years, he continued to attend church, but his doubts about God grew.

As he traveled down the Highway, the exit to "Crisisville" came up. The trial ... His young wife died of leukemia leaving him to raise two young children on his own. Unfortunately, Vern's faith turned to doubt. "Where's God in all this?" He turned away from God ... he took the exit. Satan led him into a detour into the wilderness of "Doubtland." Eventually he left the church. He continued making turns on his own, taking himself further and further away from God's Highway ... in his early 60s he married an agnostic woman. He had turned away from Jesus. Completely lost in the wilderness, he drove in circles, facing one dead end after another.

James warns the exit to “Desireton,” the exit Satan wants us to take, leads us off the Highway to Heaven into the wilderness ... to “Temptationville” ... to “Sin City” ... to death.

Like Vern, our journey begins in our baptism. In that instant, God places us on His Highway. We begin our journey of faith toward His Kingdom and eternal crown of life. However, along the way, like Vern, the Highway we’re on can have some pretty rough pavement. Sometimes there’s no pavement ... or bridges have been washed away. These trials, part of life in a fallen, sinful world, can become temptations ... causing us to exit the Highway to Heaven in search of our own way home. We can be led to give up on God’s promises to hear and answer our prayers. To fall into disbelief ... rejecting His promise of forgiveness and eternal life. To go along with the world where evil seems to be prospering and having all the fun. To selfishly hoard our time, money, and things for ourselves in fear that God won’t provide for our needs. Our desires for things of this world, even things that seem good or feel good, takeover ... Satan recognizes this and tempts us ... leads us away from God into sin ... toward death.

Satan convinced Adam and Eve, who had everything they needed, to take this exit as they journeyed on God’s Highway to eternal life in the Kingdom of heaven. Satan took advantage of their desire to be like God. Satan tempted them with the forbidden tree’s fruit. His lies led them into sin and death. What seemed like a good thing to Adam and Eve, even though God told them otherwise, became the temptation leading to death. But God remained faithful, calling to people like Abraham to lead His people back to His Highway. But even Abraham struggled to remain on the Highway to Heaven God placed him on ... he grew impatient waiting for God to give him a son. He exited by taking matters into his own hands; having a son through the slave girl Hagar.

For Abraham and Sarah, Hagar’s baby seemed to be a good thing ... they figured out their own way to help God keep His promise. But it was really just another dead-end. Despite his

doubt, God led Abraham through the detour he was on, back to the on-ramp to the Highway to Heaven. Finally, Sarah gave birth to Isaac ... the one God built, for Himself, a great nation.

Abraham must be proud of Isaac. Isaac, his true flesh and blood, his only son. Everything is going smoothly now on the journey along God's Highway. Then God says, (Genesis 22:2) *"Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."* "Screeeeech!" go the brakes! We don't hear Abraham's response. I can imagine a million thoughts rattling around in his head. Thoughts like, *"You want me to do what?! You do realize Isaac is my ONLY son?! I'm way over 100 now ... there's not going to be another chance here."* Perhaps he did have these thoughts, but Abraham refused to exit ... he trusted God and His plan. Knowing God knew best, Abraham stayed on the Highway and continued the journey the next morning.

Isaac was a dead man walking. For three days they walked ... three days! Can you even imagine this trip ... three days?! Then Abraham saw the place in the distance. He left his animal with his servants. But, he left in hope, confident in God's will, saying, (Genesis 22:5) *"I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you."* Abraham did not exit. He endured his trip on God's Highway ... climbing the mountain with Isaac, wood for the sacrifice tied to Isaac's back. Isaac innocently asked, *"Where's the lamb?"* Abraham only said, *"The Lord will provide."* He did not exit. Even as Abraham built the altar ... as he piled the wood on the altar ... as he bound his son, his only son, to the wood ... he did not exit God's Highway.

With Isaac firmly tied to the wood, Abraham lifted the knife over his head, prepared to sacrifice his only son. And suddenly!!! ... The Angel of the Lord cried out, *"Abraham! Abraham!"* Abraham stopped, saying, *"Here I am!"* God rescued Isaac from certain death three days after the journey began ... because Abraham, his father, (James 1:12) *"remain(ed) steadfast*

under trial ... he stood the test ... he received the crown of life.” He feared, trusted, and loved God above all things. He remained on God’s Highway to Heaven and the crown of life.

God proved faithful to Abraham. He provided the sacrifice ... and nearly 2100 years later, Isaac’s distant grandchild, Jesus Christ, the Son of God journeyed about 30 miles from Nazareth, to the River Jordan to be baptized by his cousin John. There He began His three-year journey to redeem His creation. His Father sent His only Son on His way saying, (Mark 1:11) *“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”* And immediately, the Holy Spirit, descending like a dove from heaven, led Jesus to His first destination ... the wilderness to face down Satan ... the one who tempts. (Matthew 4:1-11) Jesus journeyed 40 days in the wilderness while fasting ... arriving at and passing every one of Satan’s shiny, tempting exits ... food to sooth His starving and hurting stomach ... the thrill of having God rescue Him from harm ... and ultimate power on earth if only he’d bow down to worship Satan. Through it all, Jesus stayed true to the Word of God. Then the devil left Him and Jesus began His ministry urging all who hear Him then, and now, *“Repent! Turn around and turn away from your sin! I’ve built an on-ramp for you to return to your God!”* He boldly journeyed to Mount Calvary ... carrying the wooden cross and our sins upon His back ... nailed hand and foot to that cross ... suffering for our sins ... dying for our sins. And then rising from the dead three days later to secure our way back to His Highway ... to the crown of life. He defeated sin’s effects, He restores us to eternal life. Through Christ, our Father calls all of us to receive His richest blessing ... His grace and mercy in the forgiveness of our sins on account of what His only Son did on His journey. He leads all of us back to the on ramp to His Highway.

However, no matter how many dead ends Vern faced, God’s Perfect Solution, never malfunctioned. No matter how far off-track Vern got, God called out to him “Return to me.”

One Sunday morning Vern was doing what he usually does with his time on any other morning of the week, reading the newspaper. Suddenly he realized “IT’S EASTER MORNING!” He felt a compelling urge to go to church, a place he hadn’t been in over 10 years. Slinking as quietly as possible into the back row, Vern heard God calling him through His Word, rerouting Him from His dead-end, through backroads, right back to the on-ramp for His Highway. His Word spoke directions he hadn’t heard in years! He heard the joyous voices of other travelers ... singing hymns of triumph and victory over death ... proclaiming prayers of thanks and praise to the risen Christ! Vern joined with them. That Easter morning, the Holy Spirit guided Vern back onto the Highway to Heaven ... God announced His forgiveness to Vern for his sins, rescuing him from death, and restoring Him with the crown of life on account of His only Son, Jesus Christ. And today, 73-year old Vern faithfully serves God and His people as an elder, choir member, Bible study leader, and loving grandfather guiding his three grandchildren along on their journey.

In each of our baptisms, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our souls giving us the crown of life as a promised inheritance. We journey together along God’s Highway, returning to Him with our whole heart. Our Lenten journey this year will conclude as we celebrate our Lord Jesus Christ’s resurrection and His triumph over sin and death. He is our King. Our King leads us along His Highway to Heaven where He will greet us face-to-face. He will help us to **(James 1:12)** *“(remain) steadfast under trial ... (to stand) the test ... (and) receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.”*

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

James Kent