

Pastor Joe Polzin  
James 1:12-18  
“Trials and Temptations”  
Year B – First Sunday in Lent  
February 18, 2018

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Trials and temptations!” Christians use these words to describe life as we know it. It’s also what James discusses in our Epistle Reading today. I think just about all of us would agree, life can be trying at times – things in this world can truly wear us down. Not to mention, when we look around at our world today, and all that happens, especially a week like this past one, with the evil that is rampant in the world, life can truly seem like a trial.

Of course, we’re a little more hesitant to think on the topic of temptation, because that changes our perspective from looking at all the evil that is *out there*, and causing us to consider the evil that is *in here*: in our hearts. But taken together, the sin and evil that we experience outside ourselves, and the sin and evil that we know resides within us, trials and temptations may begin to concern us. May even overwhelm us.

But God, through His servant James, doesn’t leave us without hope, without strength. God provides an answer for us even in the midst of our trials and temptations. God’s Word reminds us that “every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.” That God, the generous Father, is on our side, even in trial and temptation, and it makes all the difference.

This may be hard to believe, that any good can come from the trials in our lives, but if we back up just a few verses, James begins his letter by saying, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” (vv 2–3). Joy? This may astound us, at first. There are many emotions we feel in the midst of trials. Health concerns, concern for loved ones, children, or grandchildren, financial difficulties or uncertainties, grieving, the many challenges that this life can bring – a wide range of emotions and concerns. But is joy one of them?

My family is in the midst of a time of grieving. It was a month ago when Jennie and I found out the little girl we were expecting didn’t survive the pregnancy, and that Jennie would miscarry. Now, Jennie will be gathering in a few days with her family in Indiana, as her grandfather has lost now two wives to cancer. How can a trial like this possibly be joyful?

But James writes, “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.”

You see, God uses trials to strengthen our faith. Few Christians seem to get stronger during easy times. It’s in difficult times that faith is exercised and grows stronger. And in God’s wisdom that we don’t always understand, He may test our faith through trials. It’s what He was doing with Abraham and Isaac, as God painted a picture for them of the coming day when He Himself would be the One offering His only Son as the sacrificial Lamb that would take away the sins of the world.

Trials don't usually seem fun or joyful. But God uses them to move us to flee to and cling to Him. We can trust that His hand is guiding us, and we know that through it all, God keeps His promises to us and sustains us during our trials. God is the giver of every good and perfect gift, and that includes His ability to take the trials we suffer in this world and use them for our good to strengthen our faith in Him and in His dear Son.

Therefore, we have a deep-seated joy. And this joy that we have doesn't mean that life has been easy. Or that we're always happy. But it does mean that we know that our God can bring us through even the most difficult moments of our lives, and show us all that He's done for us through His Son, Jesus. That Jesus brings us true joy.

Jesus knows all about trials. During his life, he had nowhere to lay his head. He suffered an unjust trial, he was beaten, he was given a crown of thorns and a spear in his side. He was nailed to the cross and suffered the condemnation of the world's sin. He suffered being forsaken by His Father. He knows what it means to undergo trials. He suffered trials beyond what we can possibly imagine.

Yet, Jesus always had his eyes fixed on his heavenly Father to sustain him during the very trials God ordained him to suffer, in order to save us. In perfect obedience to his Father, he suffered all, and all the while he continually kept close to his Father, had perfect faith in Him, and in His Father's will.

In your times of trials, he is there with you, knowing exactly what you're going through. And he does more than feel sorry for you. He's the one who provides the strength your faith needs. He's the one who'll carry you through the trials of this life, and give you life everlasting, the "crown of life." That crown is yours because of the trials our Savior endured for your sake. And through his Word which speaks to you, and his Sacrament which strengthens you, you are sustained in his love and grace.

That's trials, what about temptations? Clearly James is distinguishing between trials and temptations. And we should pay careful attention, because temptations are *not* the same as trials or testing. Like I said earlier, temptations can be difficult for us to think about, because we recognize in times of temptation, we are not the victims. We are the culprits.

Of course, we'd *like* to blame anyone but ourselves. We'd like to blame others, the sinful world, even the devil. "The devil made me do it!" We may even go so far as to blame God. It's what Adam did in the Garden. "The woman *you* gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." We often think in a similar way. Isn't God the one who created us with various desires in the first place? Be it desires for satisfying our needs for food, or entertainment, or intimacy, or the many other things in our lives? Did God set us up for failure?

The answer is of course no. God *did* design and create us. And all these things He created in perfection, and for our good. But when we humans introduced sin into the world at the Fall, it corrupted His design for us and for this world. Even today, we take what is meant for our good, and abuse it to the point of our harm. Our sinful desires lead us away from what God intends.

So, we can't blame God for temptation or for our falling into temptation. "God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one" (v. 13). James makes it clear that we should look no further than *ourselves* for the problem of temptation. "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" (vv 14–15).

Temptation is always around us. As God told Cain, sin is always “crouching at the door” (Gen 4:7). And temptation is unique for each of us, which temptations we’re susceptible to. Which desires lie deep in our own hearts. For some it’s certain thoughts, for others certain deeds, and still for others certain ways of speaking. And the devil is fully aware of the things he can help nudge us to give in to, though it’s still we who ultimately choose to give in. And so we struggle with our temptations. We feel guilty when we give in. We try to make up our minds to defeat it, but we can’t on our own. We won’t. We fail when we trust in ourselves to overcome it.

But God provides for us in the midst of temptation, as well. He brings us good and perfect gifts. He brings us the message, the Word of truth, the Gospel. The Gospel that tells us He gave us the best, good, and perfect gift, the gift of his Son. Jesus knows what trial is, and he also knows what temptation is.

The author of the book of Hebrews writes, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (4:15). Which is what we hear in our Gospel reading, that Jesus was tempted by Satan, and emerged through the wilderness victorious.

What’s more, Satan continued to tempt Jesus, enticing him to avoid the suffering of the cross, in order to receive all the worldly glory we can imagine. Jesus was tempted to avoid the trials that he faced, to not suffer and die on the cross for you and me. But in the Garden of Gethsemane, he submitted to his Father’s will, and prayed it would be done. Jesus perfectly overcame temptation throughout his life, so that he could go to the cross to forgive us all the times we fail. Jesus was the one who remained steadfast under trial and temptation, so that he secured the crown of life. And it’s through Jesus that God promises us this crown.

Our sinful desires give birth to sin, and we are born to die. Born into a fallen world leading to death. But God, through His Word, gives us new life and a second birth. Through Jesus, we have been adopted as His children, we have been re-created as His new creation, His “firstfruits of his creation” as James calls us. This rebirth took place at our Baptism. We now belong to God. We are His children.

Which means that as His child, God feeds you with His Word, and that sustains and reminds you of His love shown through His Son. The constant presence of Jesus is with you, as is his empathy and understanding of what you’re going through. He’s been there. And he shares his victory, and makes it yours. Our failed attempts at overcoming temptation lead to our death, but Jesus’ victory over temptation, sin and death itself leads to our crown of life.

And you’re given the taste of that victory once again this morning as you partake in the meal of Christ’s own body and blood for your forgiveness and strengthening of faith, so that you may face our next trials and temptations not with your own strength, but with his.

The next time you endure temptation, or are in the midst of a trial and your faith is being tested, rely on God and the gifts He’s given you: His Word, His Sacrament, His Son. Turn to these in the midst of your trials, and He will give you what you need: forgiveness and strength.

God knows all about trials and temptations. He’s the giver of every good and perfect gift, which means we can be assured, through the victory won for us by Jesus, that we will remain steadfast in him, and when we have stood the test, we will receive the crown of life. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.