



Sunday 25th February 2024

James

Tomorrow never comes.

James 4:13-16

We are called to worship God.

Welcome & Announcements.

Good morning and welcome to **Portstewart Presbyterian Church**, if you are visiting with us we hope you have already been made to feel welcome and that each of us know the presence of God as we worship this morning.

I want to give you an update on the process to elect new elders. This is a long and drawn-out process, but it is hopefully drawing to a conclusion. **Our three perspective new elders, Helen, Samantha and Julie will meet with the Presbytery Commission tomorrow night.** Assuming all goes well we will be able to organise and announce a date for their ordination next week. We won't ordain next week, just announce the date. **Please pray for Helen, Samantha and Julie, also please encourage them.** Tomorrow is a big moment for them, it's the last hurdle in the process.

Call to worship. Psalm 34 (Responsive)

¹I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. ²*I will glory in the Lord; let the afflicted hear and rejoice.* ³Glorify the Lord with me: let us exalt his name together.

⁴*I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears.* ⁵Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame. ⁶*This poor man called, and the Lord heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles.*

⁷The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them. ⁸*Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.* ⁹Fear the Lord, you his holy people, for those who fear him lack nothing.

¹⁰*The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.*

¹¹Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord. ¹²*Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days,*

¹³keep your tongue from evil and your lips from telling lies. ¹⁴*Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.* ¹⁵The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their cry; ¹⁶*but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil, to blot out their name from the earth.*

¹⁷The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles.

¹⁸*The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.* ¹⁹The righteous person may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all; ²⁰*he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken.*

²¹ Evil will slay the wicked; the foes of the righteous will be condemned. ²² **The Lord will rescue his servants; no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned.** Psalm 34

**Opening Praise. God, we praise you.
 The goodness of God.**

Opening Prayer.

We hear from God's Word.

Scripture Reading. James 4: 13-16

Praise. Your will be done.

Sermon: James: Tomorrow never comes.

I haven't always been a minister. I've had a few different jobs, one of which was working in **Dale Farm Ice Cream**. One of the things I learnt working with the people in Dale Farm was **failing to plan is planning to fail**. This was the first job I had that involved being part of a team responsible for planning the production schedule; making sure the right ingredients were in the factory for the right products and the right packaging was waiting for the finished product at the end of the production line.

As I'm sure you can imagine there were lots of meetings, lots of phone calls and emails to make sure everything was in place. If just one part of the chain was missing the whole production line would come to a grinding halt.

Planning isn't just an essential part of business, it's an essential part of life. It doesn't matter what we're doing in life, planning is essential. Julia keeps telling me that our dinner just doesn't happen. There is a degree of planning and thought goes into the shopping on a weekly basis as well as the daily plan to make sure the chicken is out of the freezer, or that we lift the right meat out of the fridge at the right time to make sure everything is used within its use by dates.

In church we spend a lot of time planning, I plan my preaching a church year in advance, the GB is planning its display, Michelle is planning visiting among our families. Planning is an intricate part of life. It seems strange then that James wrote: ***Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.*** (James 4: 13-14)

Is James advocating a more carefree way of life because life is short. Is he saying we shouldn't plan but instead we should be living some kind of spontaneous life that's led by God – that somehow God will give divine and dramatic leading from one moment to another?

The answer is no. God is a God who plans. Look at the detail God gave to Moses when the tabernacle was being made. Or the plans he gave to Noah for making the ark, or the plans given to Solomon for building the temple.

When we look at the covenantal nature of God, we see a God who plans. Right back in the beginning when Adam and Eve first sinned God put in place a plan not just to punish them for

their sin, but to atone for it. God planned for redemption: ***And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*** (Genesis 3:15)

How long has God's salvation plan been in the making, how long has his plan for Christ's return been in the making? God is a God of order not chaos. That impulse and need that leads people to say ***failing to plan is planning to fail*** is something that reflects the nature and image of God. James is not being critical of people, churches and businesses that plan.

So, what is James saying? ***Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do that.'*** (James 4:15)

The film, **The Kingdom of God**, tells a story set during the crusades about the relationship between a Christian crusader who finds himself leading the defence of Jerusalem and **Saladin** a Sultan leading the Muslim rebellion.

In the film Saladin's relationship with God or Allah, is characterised in how he repeatedly talks about God's will. Saladin's understanding of God's will (Allah's will) is a fatalistic understanding. Allah has decided and so it will be. Saladin makes his own plans, and the outcomes of those plans determine what the will of God was and is. If he wins the war, it was God's plan, if he loses, he accepts that as God's plan.

James isn't advocating this fatalistic approach to the will of God. What James is saying is that when we plan, be it for a business trip, a church program or anything else in life that we place God at the centre. What does that mean?

What normally happens when we say things like this is that we formulate a plan and then we come to prayer and ask God to rubber stamp our plans. In effect we say, God this is what we have decided will you now please give your approval. This is no different to Saladin's approach. God we will try this and if it works, it was your plan.

James describes this approach in this way: ***As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil.*** (James 4:16) The idea that we would come to God with a plan already set in stone to simply ask for his approval is arrogance.

Before Jesus appointed his 12 disciples, he spent the night in prayer. ***One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, who he also designated apostles.*** (Luke 6: 12-13)

This was not a quick 5-minute prayer, it wasn't even a prayer meeting that was called where Jesus prayed for a whole hour. This is earnest, patient prayer where Jesus not only spoke to God but listened for his response.

What do we do when we pray? Who does all the talking and who does all the listening? Jesus created time in his busy life to earnestly seek his Father's will. We see the same thing happening in the Garden of Gethsemane, we remember Jesus famous words, ***He withdrew***

about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.' (Luke 22: 41-42)

Here we have Jesus seeking God and allowing the outcome of that seeking to influence his life choices, even though that influence would lead directly to the cross. This is what James is talking about. A few weeks ago, we talked about how faith should impact our lives, and this is the same message. This time James is saying prayer should be affecting our lives.

We read our bibles, we pray for loved ones, we pray about situations at home, work, in church and across the world – but do we ever listen to how God is answering, or do we just assume that his answer will be in line with what we're already thinking.

Last week James told us, ***Submit yourselves, then to God.*** (James 4:7) This is what it means for us to submit to God. So, this is the challenge James leaves every single one of us with: Do we make our own plans and expect God to get on board with us, or do we take the time to prayerfully plan fully accepting that while the things we want to do might be honourable and laudable, but we need to be willing to change because of God's plans. James describes a determination to do what we want as opposed to what he reveals to us like this. ***If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.*** (James 4:17)

Folks why do we pray, why do we read our bibles – to be blunt what's the point if all we ever do is talk and never take the time to listen, and what's the point in listening if we don't act on what we're being told.

Our Sunday services are full of words; full of us talking, full of me talking; this morning we're going to take some time to listen. Instead of me praying we're going to use a time of silence to listen, to get used to the idea that we might actually hear from God and have our lives changed by God as we pray and listen for his response.