

Wisdom for Survival

James 3:13-4:3, James 4:7-8a

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for[a] those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet[b] something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Friends, today happens to be Theological Education Sunday, and the James passage that we are looking at is all about wisdom, which seems pretty fitting.

I grew up in a household where knowledge and discovery were at the center of everything. My father and I, much to my mother's chagrin, would spend hours pouring over encyclopedias and Google to find answers to random questions that struck my six-year-old brain. I would ask my dad everything from "where does water come from?" to "is there life on other planets?" and "what happens to people after we die?" My dad would then sit down with me, and sometimes an encyclopedia and the computer, and we'd spend the afternoon sitting in wonder together. My dad honored and celebrated the questions that I had about the way the world worked, every single day, never getting impatient with my "whys", and instead making me part of that process of discovery. He never pretended to have the answers to the harder questions, and instead would be honest with me with his own process of discernment, and willing to work with me to help me figure it out.

It was in those many afternoons sitting next to my dad at the computer that I was able to feel the true importance of knowledge and information, as well as realize that not everything has easy answers. He let me sit in that complex space of discovery with him, and allowed me to feel important and smart. He gave me the confidence and understanding from a very young age that information is complicated, and never pretended that he knew every single answer.

In this day and age, in the midst of a pandemic that is never ending and a political scene that is incredibly topsy turvy we are more aware than ever that no information has easy

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answers. And more than that, discerning what information to listen to is a matter of survival, of safety, of keeping ourselves and others alive. Information, as overwhelming as it can be, and it is constantly overwhelming, enables us to make decisions to help us survive. And, it is so incredibly difficult to discern what knowledge is helpful and what is not. What knowledge we should listen to, and what we should not.

In today's passage, James, commonly considered "James the Just," Jesus' brother, is addressing wisdom. James here offers some nuance to the acquisition of information we are constantly inundated with. James in this passage shows us that wisdom is not something that we are to simply take, but is a gift given to us by the grace of God to help us survive both as individuals and as a community. He shows us that God gives us wisdom to help us survive

In the time of James, the people he is addressing are similar to us in a space of trying to discern what was "good" and not good information. He was addressing Jews in the diaspora. Jews that lost their home base and are trying to understand their identities in a world that just does not make sense. All of the knowledge they had about their world no longer applies, and they are being inundated with new knowledge that they never knew before as they exist in this perpetual unknown.

Does this space sound familiar? Every day we get new information about how we should be acting, and what we should be doing. We feel guilt and shame for the ways that we are acting based on that information, no matter what we are doing. Everything is changing, all the time, and the information we know one day simply does not apply the next, most of the time. We are in this weird in-between space of pandemic-tide. The pandemic is still happening and spreading, but state regulations say one thing about what we should do, while the local regulations say another, while our minds say one thing, and our hearts say another.

It is this constant discernment of what information is correct for us as individuals as well as for us as a community. There is a huge pressure in decision-making right now based on the everchanging information of the time, and the stakes of survival. Knowledge is important, but when we can't discern what is applicable at any moment, it becomes overwhelming and stressful.

How is your body reacting right now as I talk through this? I'm constantly feeling a little tense; the stress of the unknown and the discernment of what is correct and wrong is constantly embodied in my back, my neck, and my gut. It is hard to be in this space of infinite knowledge without discernible action. And I bet all of y'all are feeling this too. This is a stress response, one that our bodies do to help us survive fight or flight situations. Information and knowledge that we have the pressure to discern ourselves is painful and elicits that stress response. But there is another force that is working in this information discernment, one that can bring us comfort in challenging times.

Notice that here in James, James isn't talking about knowledge, he is talking about wisdom. In fact, throughout the whole book of James, the word knowledge, *gnósis* in Greek, is never once used. Instead, James always uses the word *sophia*, wisdom. I

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conjecture that this distinction is intentional. Knowledge is trying to figure out how the way the world works without trying to understand the mystery of God within information. Wisdom invokes something that is provided by God, that God is in conversation with. Wisdom is knowledge with God's intentional involvement. Wisdom, knowledge that God is helping us to discern, is what God is calling us to listen to. God gives us wisdom to help us survive, comforting us in hard times, and helping us to get through.

I want to invite you all to visualize a challenging choice you have made recently. Think about how you felt at that moment. Think about the information that you were holding all at once. Now take a breath. See if you can pinpoint where God was in that decision process. See if you can notice where the Spirit was working within you to guide and support you. God was with you as you discerned, whether or not you were actively aware of it at that moment.

God gives us wisdom to help us to make decisions, however big or however small. It is God's working with us through the Spirit that separates wisdom from knowledge. This wisdom is always there, but we can become more aware of it through prayer and intentional discernment. This wisdom does not erase all of the information that is surrounding us, but instead gives us peace of God's support through challenging times. In this way, God acts as an ultimate active comforter, working through wisdom to help us to survive.

This text in James, as he is talking to Jews in diaspora, in the ultimate unknown, says: "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." I disagree with James here. I believe that God is already drawn near to us, whether or not we are aware of it.

God is always with us as we parse through difficult decisions, and we can work to become more aware of God's work within us in challenging moments.

This James text references Proverbs 3:21-26 which states:

My child, do not let these escape from your sight:
keep sound wisdom and prudence,
and they will be life for your soul
and adornment for your neck.
Then you will walk on your way securely
and your foot will not stumble.
If you sit down, you will not be afraid;
when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.
Do not be afraid of sudden panic,
or of the storm that strikes the wicked;
for the Lord will be your confidence
and will keep your foot from being caught.

This proverb is an incredible recognition of the peace that comes through recognizing God in our decisions. It is surrender. It is peace. It is survival.

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There is a surrender in recognizing how God works with us. It is a release of stress and control to God's power in us. It is not a call to ignorance of what information we have, but instead an invitation to partnership and conversation with the divine to help us parse through the countless messages we receive to help us find peace. God gives us wisdom, working with us to lead us. It is in that recognition that our embodied survival mode can begin to shift from flight or fight and exhaustion to divine peace. God helps us to survive, but not in a pushy way. Instead, in wisdom, God helps us survive in a way that brings comfort and peace.

But this wisdom is not just to bring us peace, it is a call outwards to bring peace to the whole community. James says: "And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace." This wisdom is not just for us to hold near to ourselves as individuals. It calls us to act in ways that help our whole community to survive. It calls us to follow God to do what is best in our community. God gives us wisdom to help us survive ourselves, but also to help our whole community get through trials, together.

This recognition of God working through us by giving us wisdom informs our individual decisions that impact whole communities for peace and for survival. The wisdom that God gives us is the wisdom that calls us to receive vaccines to protect our neighbors. This is the wisdom that calls us to wear masks, to check in on those around us, to pray for one another, and to recognize that we are part of a larger community that is surviving together.

Working for peace with one another means listening to God's wisdom to support each other in our survival. It's a call to action, of recognition that we are all responsible for each other's well-being. God's wisdom is a gift for all of us, and it is a huge responsibility.

So today, friends, I invite you to whenever you feel stressed, whenever you feel tired, whenever you feel overwhelmed by the millions of decisions that have to be made, turn to God. Recognize that God is with you in all of the ups and downs that you are going through, helping and leading you with wisdom and peace. Recognize that God is giving us wisdom to lift up and support each other, and is giving us wisdom to help us all survive, every single one of us, and that in this wisdom is the responsibility to act for communal peace and wellbeing.

And it is that comfort, ultimate support, and call outwards from our creator that we give thanks. Amen.

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