

Sunday, May 2, 2004

A Sermon Preached by
The Reverend Dr. Thomas K. Tewell



When You Face an Insurmountable Obstacle

James 1:2-4, 12-16

Will You Pray With Me? Gracious and loving God, everyone of us has come today with a need. The need may be something obvious that we're wearing on our face. The need may be something tucked away in the innermost part of our soul. O God, it may be that we come not even aware in our consciousness of our need. But you know us. Please reveal to us today our need. We pray that this message might hit everyone of us exactly at that point of need. To that end, pour through me the gift of preaching that these words might not simply be my human words or human opinions, but by a miracle of your grace, they will become your living word to us. We know they will, for we pray with anticipation in the strong name of Jesus, the risen and the reigning Christ. Amen

Today we are beginning a sermon series on the book of James, titled "Defining Moments." The book of James is to the New Testament what Proverbs is to the Old Testament. James, although only five chapters in length and much shorter than the 31 chapters of Proverbs, contains distilled wisdom. During the next two months I'd love you to read the book of James. In it we will find the distilled wisdom that will help us when we face the defining moments and the hardest challenges of life.

I find it so appropriate that my sermon today is titled, "When You Face an Insurmountable Obstacle" for today is the day of the New York City "Five-Borough Bike Race" and the Cuban Day Parade. I plan my sermons a summer ahead of time but I never dreamed that these events would be taking place today!

Isn't it true that every one of us faces insurmountable obstacles and if we want to be honest, insurmountable obstacles are no laughing matter. Today in the nation of Israel, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has called for a referendum on whether or not Israel should stay in the Gaza Strip. The outcome of this referendum will go a long way in determining Israel's future foreign policy. The prime minister wants to pull out and many others want to stay in. Even as we learn later today of the outcome of this referendum, we continue to wonder

**"What a friend we have in Jesus.
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will there ever be peace in the Middle East? Are the feelings of anger and hatred, and resentment and bitterness such insurmountable obstacles that they can never be overcome?

This past week, I read with horror, just as many of you did, the story on the front page of USA Today – "Iraq's Deadliest Month". One hundred and thirty-four young people were killed and 116 of them were pictured on the front page. The others were still being identified. The median age of these dear young people is 23 years old! We have to wonder is there any way out of this horror? What do we do? How do we go forward in Iraq? Is this such an insurmountable obstacle that we might never be extricated from it?

If every one of us were to be honest today, I think we would admit that we face insurmountable obstacles, at least seemingly insurmountable obstacles, in all of our lives. I know people in this congregation who have been out of work for 12 months. Some have been searching for a job for two and even three years. Some are wondering, will I ever find a job? They do consulting and temporary work but what they are looking for is a secure income and frankly getting a job in this difficult economy, at certain ages and stages of a career, seems like an insurmountable obstacle. Others are trying to get their lives in balance in this the busiest and most frenetic-paced city in the world. It's not easy. Even as a Christian, as a follower of Jesus Christ, many of us take on commitments serving the church and our communities and find we are working 50, 60, 70, 80, even 90 hours a week! How do we get our lives together and in balance?

Some are trying to overcome an addiction that seems like an insurmountable barrier. It could be an addiction

to food, alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, or sex. No matter what it is, it's not easy to overcome the powerful grip of an addiction. How do you get free of it? It can seem like an insurmountable obstacle.

Before we come to communion, Dr. McCloud will read the names of twelve people who are members of this congregation or are related to members of this congregation who died in the last few weeks or months. There are at least 12 families who when those names are read will get a little catch in their throats because it is not easy remembering again that a loved one has died. We miss them. Dare I say, there are hundreds of others in this congregation who are grieving the loss of a loved one. Sometimes people have multiple losses. We have a member of our congregation who lost a husband and a son in a 12-month period.

I say this with all respect and love for the scripture, but when you think about these poignant stories and read this morning's lesson, the scripture at first seems very insensitive. "Count it all joy," James says "when you face various trials." Now, wait a minute. What if the one whose name was read was a member of our family? What if the one out of work is our spouse or brother or even us? What if the one who learned 'it's malignant' is a close friend? Could we say with James "Count it all joy when you face various trials"? James goes on to say, "Count it all joy when you face various trials for the testing of your faith produces endurance and let endurance have its full effect that you might be perfect and complete lacking in nothing." At first glance the scripture seems not only insensitive, it makes us a little angry. It seems overly simplistic. It seems like James has just glossed over the surface of the pain of life. This is not easy.

The reason people in the early church took these words seriously and the reason we need to take James seriously is that the author of James is none other than the bishop of Jerusalem. I've read various books on the subject and scholars do disagree about it, but the more I studied, it made the most sense to me that the author of James was the bishop of Jerusalem. During the early years the church suffered a great deal of persecution under indictment by the society and James suffered with the church. He was persecuted, ridiculed and misunderstood and yet he stood firm over the church in Jerusalem. He was known as James the Just. Many people think James was the half brother of our Lord Jesus Christ. A few months after James wrote the words, "Count it all joy when you face various trials" he was stoned to death. In those days words were written on parchment scrolls and carried by ship to far reaching places. Christians would gather together by the riverbank or in a home and someone would open the scroll. Here's a word from James the bishop of Jerusalem.

"Count it all joy when you face various trials for the testing of your faith produces steadfast endurance. And let endurance have its full effect that we may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." These were the words of James who was just martyred for his faith. This is no pious platitude. These are the words of a fellow sufferer. These words have been refined in the fire of life.

In fact, the word James uses for testing is the word *dokime*, a Greek word describing the process when steel is put into a blast furnace and the impurities are seasoned off. That's *dokime*. When all the impurities are burned off, you have sterling silver in the purest form. In other words, when you go through the fires of life, you'll be refined. You'll be purified. Therefore you can count it all joy. Now let me be very clear. James is not saying rejoice in your circumstances. He is not saying, "God causes all suffering." He is not saying all suffering is easy. What James is saying is, "When you go through the suffering of life, you can have joy because you are not alone. There is one who walks down the road with you. Out of the darkest evil this one can bring good. His name is Jesus Christ."

There's nothing happy in this text. It's joyful. Happiness comes from the Greek word *hap* meaning chance. If by chance your circumstances are good, you're happy. James is talking about something much deeper than happiness. The Greek word joy is *makarios* – a deep, abiding, inner joy that no circumstance can ever take away. *Makarios* comes, joy comes, when in the midst of pain, you dip down and Jesus Christ is there.

In 1857 Joseph Scriven needed Jesus Christ. Joseph Scriven was a follower of Jesus Christ but relatively new in his faith. He was in love and very happy and about to be married. The afternoon before the wedding his fiancée went swimming and accidentally drowned. Joseph Scriven plunged into despair. Where do you turn when a loved one dies? Where do you turn when there's nowhere else to turn. He turned to Jesus Christ. He allowed Jesus into his pain. The pain didn't magically disappear. The pain was as intense as ever but he wasn't alone in the pain. A few months later as healing came, he began to put one foot in front of the other.

William Styron, in *Darkness Visible*, talks about depression as walking through a vat of oil, like sinking in quicksand, like moving through molasses – it's hard to put one foot in front of another. Some of us know what that's like. As Joseph Scriven did this, he realized Jesus was walking alongside him and giving him strength. He even realized he was leaning on Jesus. Jesus had embraced him in his arms. Joseph Scriven took pen and paper and wrote, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus. All our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer." This is no simplistic hymn. This hymn has depth. Scriven had depth

because his life had been refined in the fire of suffering. He knew what it was like to have nowhere else to turn – to be bereft, to be angry at life, to be angry at God, to be angry even at his fiancée.

Anger isn't always rational. Scriven knew that Jesus could help him through his time of grief. Listen to this text. "Count it all joy, makarios, deep abiding joy when you face various trials. Perismoi is the Greek word – trials that are purposeful. God doesn't cause all suffering. But God can use all suffering for greater purposes. In other words, it is purposeful. God can use it for good, for the testing – dokíme – the purifying of your faith and that produces endurance – hupomóne. You'll hang in there no matter what. You'll develop an endurance as you go through life. You'll get stronger and purified.

Soren Kirkegaard said, "We live our lives going forward. We only understand them looking back." This isn't an easy truth if you're in the midst of suffering. But when you look through the rearview mirror of faith, you'll say, "Ah ha, maybe God was at work when I didn't get into that school, when I didn't get that job, when that relationship didn't go forth into a marriage. Maybe God was at work in guiding me through that cancer." It's not easy. We can't always hear the truths of God in an instant. It's as we look back over time we realize God was at work.

Let me give you a simple illustration of this truth. Years ago I played high school basketball. Our coach was known for his grueling practices and workouts. He would work us for a 2- to 3-hour practice. As soon as we thought practice was over, he'd say, "Okay guys, just a few more minutes. We're going to do wind sprints." He made us run wind sprints down to the end of the court and back several times. Then he'd say, "Now we're going to do something really fun. I want the starting five to get on the court with five defenders and play keep away. If you can keep the ball away from these five defenders for one minute without them intercepting the ball, practice is over." We thought, oh this is going to be great. But 15 seconds into the drill, the coach added a sixth person on the defense. Then 15 more seconds he added a seventh and then an eighth. So now five people were trying to keep it away from eight. It's hard to do that. It's hard work. When we finished those practices we would go down into the locker room. Many were almost sick to their stomachs. We were overcome. We were drained and exhausted. We had no more endurance. Everyone was cursing the coach, and yelling that he was a terrible coach. (Of course I was in the corner, praying!)

Then came the day when we had an important play-off game. We're ahead by two points with a minute left, coach calls timeout. This is in the days before the 30-second clock or the 24-second clock. Our coach says,

"OK guys, play keep away! All the five of you have to do is keep the ball away from the other five for a minute. You can do it. You've done it with 6 and 7 and 8." Actually it was quite easy and we won the game. After the game everyone was saying, "Oh that coach, he's brilliant." But it was suffering that produced the endurance. Do you see?

What James is trying to say is, "Count it all joy when you face these trials". In the moment we can't see it. It's only as Kirkegaard said, "When you look back to that moment, you will see that maybe God was at work in the midst of that suffering." We don't like it at the moment but maybe God is making us stronger and more purified so that when someone else faces trials we will be able to offer not simplistic help but the depth of help that is refined by suffering. Do you hear the voice of God in this? "Count it all joy when you face various trials." It's not easy. It's not simple. It's hard.

Phillip Yancey is a wonderful author. His writing is earthy, honest and vulnerable. I try to read everything he writes. In his book *Where is God When it Hurts*, he is very honest about anger at God and about the trials and tribulations of life. He doesn't mince his words. Phillip Yancey had suffered and he had suffered in the Christian community. He couldn't understand why a loving God would allow pain. Yancey writes, "If God loved us then why is there pain?" Dr. Paul Brand, a medical doctor, who worked with leprosy patients in India met with Phillip Yancey and said, "Phillip, I love your book. I love your work but your thinking about pain, your theology of pain and suffering is simplistic." Phillip Yancey said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, you wrote how could a loving God allow pain and I understand that's a human feeling. But the thing I would most like to give my leprosy patients is pain."

Phillip Yancey looked at him. Incredulously, Dr. Brand said, "That's right. Leprosy infects the nervous system and infects the nerve endings so that nowhere in your body can you feel any pain. If you pick up a rake and the rake has a splinter in it, you can't feel it. You may be hurt yourself or get an infection, but you can't feel it – you have no warning signals. Pain is a warning signal – call the physician. The greatest gift I can give my leprosy patients is my research on how to feel pain. Pain isn't bad. It's a warning sign that something is wrong. Sometimes the pain is part of the redemptive healing process. A sneeze, a fever is good, it's part of your body's healing itself by the grace of God." And Phillip Yancey got a whole new understanding about what James, a fellow sufferer, meant when he said, "Count it all joy when you face various trials."

In just a moment Dr. McCloud is going to welcome you to this table. But it's not Dr. McCloud's table, nor is it Dr. Tisdale's or Rev. Ammon's or mine and it's not

yours. And it doesn't belong to the Presbyterian Church (USA). It doesn't belong to any denomination. This table belongs to Jesus. Jesus is the host. Jesus Christ is the only one who can invite us to this table. I must confess, I've been mystified and saddened – even angry, reading in the newspaper in recently that a Roman Catholic cardinal in the Vatican said, “If you speak out against an official position of the Roman Catholic church, you may not come to communion. We'll give you a blessing but we will not give you the bread and the juice.” Gov. McGreevy of New Jersey was thinking of going to the investiture of the new bishop of Camden. The new bishop said, “If he comes I will not serve him communion for he is divorced and remarried, without an annulment.”

I don't begin to understand that. But what I understand in the marrow of my bones is: this table is not for perfect people. This table is not only for those with whom we agree. This table is for everyone, everyone,

because Jesus died on the cross and God raised Jesus Christ from the dead for us all. And all you need to do to come to the table is to know your need, to want a fresh start, to want a new beginning, to want to begin again, to want to be forgiven, to want to believe in Jesus Christ as savior and Lord. And maybe you don't even understand the words but you want the Bread of Life. You're broken. Take home and read again the beautiful prayer of confession that Rev. Ammon wrote and read today. It's out of the broken bread and it's out of the crushed grapes that our lives are put together because they're symbols of the only One who can offer us wholeness.

This could be the most important moment of your life. If we come in our need, in our imperfection – if we reach out our hands and will only receive the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, then we will know what Joseph Scriven meant when he said, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”. He's inviting us to the table. Will you come?

Dr. Tewell's sermons are available on CD or cassette tape .
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