

Good morning everyone! It is so good to be here, in a place that feels like home. I know many of you; to those of you who are guests to this congregation, welcome. For those of you who I have not had the chance to interact with before, my name is Casey Aldridge. I am a student at Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey and an inquirer for ordination in the Presbyterian Church (USA), under the care of this congregation. I was raised in Mt. Pleasant and Concord, baptized in this church, confirmed before this congregation, and have spent more evenings than I can count with the youth group right here in Davis Hall, as a participant and as a volunteer during my four years at UNC Charlotte. I really love what y'all have done with the space this summer, and I can't wait to see the sanctuary upon its completion.

But for me to call First Pres my faith home never had *too* much to do with the building—it was always about the people and the community who raised me in faith. And so, I want to start by saying thank you, and to say that it is an honor to be preaching my first full sermon in this place, in your presence. (And I feel it necessary to note that this is my first full sermon—I will take an 'Introduction to Preaching' course this fall at Princeton Seminary, so if I stumble, don't attribute it to Princeton's inadequate instruction. At least not yet.)

Today's lectionary reading comes from The Letter of James, chapter 1, verses 17 through 27. Listen now for what scripture has to say to us, both individually and as the church:

¹⁷ Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. ¹⁹ You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. ²¹ Therefore, rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

²² But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³ For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴ for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵ But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. ²⁶ If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Now, in today's reading, James addresses a particular audience. "If any *think* they are religious."

Twenty-first century Americans have a complicated relationship with that word: *religious*. Young people in particular tend to run from the label. For many in my generation, the term is associated with institutionalized homophobia and sexism, bureaucracy, groupthink, and xenophobia. To many, religion implies an in-group and an out-group, a violent and exclusive us-versus-them mentality that looks increasingly unattractive every day.

And yet, in spite of a decline in religious identification in the United States, some spiritual remnant remains strong. I'm sure that by now, you've encountered someone who identifies as "spiritual but not religious." That identification is a peculiarly American phenomenon, one that reflects the stark individualism of American capitalist culture. According to a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center last December, nine in ten Americans believe in a higher power of some form, even if only 56% of Americans say that they believe in the God of

the Bible.¹ That's remarkably high. Even more extraordinary were the findings of a different Pew poll taken earlier this year, which found that Americans who do not identify as part of any religious institution or tradition are in many ways more religious than "*Christians* in several European countries, including France, Germany, and the U.K." According to the international study, "only 23 percent of European Christians say they believe in God with absolute certainty... 27 percent of religiously-unaffiliated Americans say this."²

So in America we have this great amount of certainty regarding the *existence* of God, but far less consensus when it comes to acting upon that certainty in any collective or corporate manner. Or I might put it this way: in today's society, we have a strong sense that God *exists*, but a far weaker sense of God's sovereignty and call. We say that we "believe in God," but we struggle to identify Jesus as the Lord of our life and of the cosmos. Too often, our belief is disconnected from our conduct; too often, we settle for the certainty of God's existence and neglect Jesus' words in the 16th chapter of Matthew: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." For too many modern American Christians, faith is *only* about one's individual relationship with God—something that needs no church to make meaning of ancient texts and traditions, no collective body of Christ to manifest God's activity in the world.

I think that the Letter of James reflects a biblical view of faith that is much richer than certainty, much more profound than simple knowledge *about* God, and much deeper than one's individual spiritual relationship with God. I think the view of faith we hear in James is a view consistent with what we see across Scripture, including in the Book of Jonah.

In my second semester of Hebrew at seminary, our class translated the Book of Jonah, and I remembered why Jonah's is one of my favorite stories in the Bible. The dialogue between Jonah and God is funny and ironic and rich and rewarding, and the book perfectly strikes the balance between the individual heart's relationship with God on one hand, and God's desire for prophetic social action and mercy on the other. But my favorite characters in Jonah are the often-overlooked sailors in chapter one.

In the first chapter of Jonah, the prophet flees God's call. Setting out on a ship to Tarshish, Jonah is caught up in a "great tempest." The ship's sailors try to determine the cause of the storm, at which point Jonah acknowledges that the storm is on account of him, that God is trying to shake Jonah out of the boat and set him back on the path to Nineveh.

The frightened sailors then ask Jonah what they should do to calm the storm, and he tells them quite plainly to toss him overboard into the sea. By tossing Jonah overboard, the sailors would be doing God's work... *but they don't know this.* Jonah is on the inside. *He* knows God's will. And so, giving in, he tells the sailors to toss him overboard in order to save their lives.

But they *don't*... at least not at first. According to the text, they began (or continued) to row, trying to return to shore. The Hebrew word that the author of Jonah uses for 'rowing' comes from the root חָתַר (*chatar*), which literally means to dig or break through a wall—in this case, a wall of waves.

I find this to be one of the most moving illustrations of solidarity and faith in the entire Bible. In a story that is dominated by Jonah's struggle with God's mercy, we get a glimpse into the power of the courage and faith of ordinary folks. For a moment, the story is interrupted by

¹ Pew Research Center, "When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean?" April 25, 2018: <http://www.pewforum.org/2018/04/25/when-americans-say-they-believe-in-god-what-do-they-mean/>

² Pew Research Center, "Being Christian in Western Europe," May 29, 2018: <http://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/>

the largely insignificant, unnamed sailors who (however momentarily) reject the need for certainty. They refuse to abandon the foreigner in their midst, and resolutely extend refuge to Jonah. In this way, they are committed to *doing* Torah and serving the God of the Exodus from Egypt, even if it appears that they do so in vain, against the very One who created and commands the heavens and the sea.

Jonah is certain of God's existence, and he is even uniquely certain of God's will. Nevertheless, Jonah is reluctant to follow God and be faithful to God's will. So far, he is the hearer of the word that James criticizes, who looks at himself in the mirror of God's word and yet who immediately forgets what he looks like, failing to act on that same word. This, after all, is the criticism that God levels with Jonah by the book's end: "is it right for [Jonah] to be angry" at God's mercy towards Nineveh? Is it right for us to be angry when God shows mercy to *our* enemies?

Meanwhile, the sailors on that ship to Tarshish cannot see the entire picture. They lack Jonah's privileged proximity to God; they have no word to hear, no mirror in which to see themselves. They do not know why God needs Jonah to go to Nineveh, nor do they know why Jonah has resisted God's will up to this point. They *only* know what is right conduct toward one's neighbor:

- To extend radical hospitality and refuge to the stranger in their midst;
- To break through any and all waves and walls that stand in the way of that holy task, and;
- To do so even and especially in the face of uncertainty and fear, and in the face of the powers-that-be in the world, which so often draw upon divine authority and appeals to certainty to justify oppression and divide-and-conquer politics.

In today's lectionary reading, I hear a hymn to those brave and uncertain sailors. James calls on us to "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive [ourselves]... To care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep [ourselves] unstained by the world." *This*—the doing of the word in a world that hears, but does not act—is the litmus test of one's religiousness for James. It is not the certain knowledge of God's existence that enables faith and draws one close to God, but rather the act of caring for those children who have been separated from their parents at the border and for those who have been made widows by gun violence and mass incarceration that marks the religious life, the life of faith.

This summer, I joined over twenty other Presbyterians in walking from Louisville, Kentucky to Saint Louis, Missouri ahead of our denomination's 223rd General Assembly. We walked 212 miles over the course of two weeks, in order to encourage the church to divest its stock holdings in fossil fuel companies. Almost every night we stayed at local churches in southern Indiana and southern Illinois, holding worship services and lifting up the stories of those who have been displaced, killed, and impacted by climate change and our civilization's addiction to fossil fuels. A little over a week in, on a Saturday night, we arrived at Salem Presbyterian Church in Salem, Illinois. The next morning, between breakfast and worship, Mina Haddad, Abby Brockway, and I joined a small group of parishioners in their bible study. That morning's study was of Jesus' parable of the kingdom of heaven as a mustard seed, a very small seed that, once sown, becomes the "greatest of all shrubs" and a safe home for "the birds of the air."

The agricultural metaphor resonated with many of the local parishioners, who were nevertheless quick to note that the mustard seed is neither the smallest of all seeds nor does it

produce the greatest of all shrubs. But I was most struck by the words of one of my fellow walkers, who read the parable from the position of the seed itself. A mustard seed, she noted, must exert a great deal of effort to push onwards toward the surface, through inches of dense soil much heavier than the plant itself in its infancy. Moreover, the seed has no guarantee of what lies on the other side of the soil. There is no guarantee that its labor will be rewarded, and yet it nevertheless perseveres. It pushes in the general direction of the surface, even though it might be easier to stay still, not because it is certain that it will find the warmth of the sun and the freedom of the air, but because it *believes and hopes* in the sun and in the air.

Certainty is not our enemy, of course, but neither is it our aim. Our aim as Christians ought to be nothing less than veneration of and fellowship with the Triune God. And if we spend our time and our energy pursuing certainty, we neglect God's call to follow boldly in the way of Jesus. If the question of being certain in our faith gets in the way of doing the work that God has called us to do, then our need or desire for certainty stands in the way of really *following* the way of love that Jesus has laid out before us. Literary critic Terry Eagleton conjectures that "Faith... is not primarily a belief that something or someone exists, but a commitment and allegiance—faith *in* something which might make a difference to the frightful situation you find yourself in." Eagleton continues, saying that he understands "Christian faith, as... not primarily a matter of signing on for the proposition that there exists a Supreme Being, but the kind of commitment made manifest by a human being at the end of his [or her] tether, foundering in darkness, pain, and bewilderment, who nevertheless remains faithful to the promise of a transformative love."³

That's the gospel, as I understand it: that God loves us, and through love God transforms us. God came to us in Jesus Christ and assumed every undignified facet of the human experience, even unto death. Even, I think, unto doubt and uncertainty. On the cross, Jesus cries out to God in Aramaic, asking "why have you forsaken me?" For theologian Peter Rollins, "while the image of suffering is truly harrowing, it is not the only or even the central horror of this central event... the true horror of the cross... [is that] it signals the seeming abandonment of God by God and the possible victory of an all-embracing nihilism."⁴

And yet, in a moment of unfathomable pain and uncertainty, Jesus does not at that point do as Jonah did, and try to escape. He doesn't try and get off easy. Jesus does as the sailors on that ship to Tarshish did—he refuses to let something as small as doubt stand in the way of something as large as God's will. Jesus remains faithful to God and refuses to renounce the power of transformative love, even if the Romans will kill him for it. Jesus died in order to be with us, in life and in death and in faith and in doubt. Now the question for those of us who are called to honor and to follow Jesus becomes this: how are we to proceed, both in times of certainty and in times of doubt? In order to follow Jesus, I think that we must follow the example of the mustard seed. We need not abandon our certainty, but we do need to abandon our *need* for certainty, and the paralyzing *anxiety* that the pursuit of certainty produces within us. When our certainty falters, and when doubt creeps in, let us emulate the mustard seed and press on in boldness and in hope and in faith, hoping and *trusting* that what God has done has indeed been done, and that we now are laborers for God's kingdom.

The mark of the gospel and the mark of faith is to abandon the transactional idea that I do good things in order to be rewarded. On the contrary, faith asserts that we are loved by God and saved by God's good grace—now let us celebrate and worship God with our hands and our feet.

³ Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 37.

⁴ Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2006), 78.

The faith James teaches looks like the backpack program of this congregation, to benefit food-insecure schoolchildren and their families through Coltrane-Webb Elementary School. It looks like the bus outside in the parking lot. It looks like giving shelter to the homeless, friendship to the lonely, a shoulder to cry on for those grieving, and sanctuary to immigrants. It looks like a thousand Presbyterians marching through the streets of Saint Louis this summer during General Assembly, demanding an end to discriminatory cash-bail policies, and bailing out local community members who could not afford to post bail for nonviolent offenses.

According to James, we don't do the work of the kingdom so that we will get into heaven. We do the work of the kingdom so that we can participate in the resurrecting power of God here and now. We comfort the stranger and release the prisoners and feed the hungry not in order to earn divine favor, but because we already have it, even when we're not sure that we have it.

Whether or not we are certain that God exists, whether or not we "*think* we are religious," let us be laborers for the kingdom of heaven, this Labor Day and every day. We will have our days of certainty and our days of doubt, but let us never cease to identify Jesus as Lord of our action. Let us never cease to desire the realm of justice and righteousness that God has promised to bring into being, and let us never tire of working in its name. Remember this: your uncertainty does not stand between you and the unconditional, radical love of God. Now go and love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.