



“HOLY SHIFT”
SCRIPTURE: JAMES 3:13-4:3, 7-8a
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
September 19, 2021
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James 3:13 - 4:3, 7-8a

3:13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

3:14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth.

3:15 Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.

3:16 For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

3:17 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.

3:18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

4:1 Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?

4:2 You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask.

4:3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

4:7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

4:8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Maybe you know someone who is a lot like the person who wrote the Book of James--at once refreshingly clear and brutally honest.

James has a way of penetrating right to the nerve ending in us that is both tender and needs to be reawakened for the world to change.

The staff kind of accidentally fell into this sermon series on James that we've been having these last several weeks. We didn't plan on it. We've barely had time to look ahead.

But Spirit has been building this conversation through James' writing. The lectionary told us the passage to use without any forethought from us. Each week we've marveled at how the scripture meets us right where we are, with exactly what we need to hear.

No this sermon series of James wasn't a grand staff plan. Things have been that intense--the Delta variant has changed all the plans we had for this fall. We have not been able to get any traction or momentum with the vision we had dreamed up because, well because COVID just keeps delivering these one two punches.

It's little wonder a lot of people, perhaps including some of you, have reached your saturation point and have started acting like nothing is wrong in the world... Just proceeding as if we should be able to move about as we please.

- Even though 1 in 500 people in the United States have died of COVID.
- Even though 51 people in Buncombe County died last month alone of COVID.
- Even though the majority of new COVID cases in Buncombe County are children.
- Even though every week more people in our congregation are testing positive for COVID.

If we had been doing in person indoor worship this summer, there is no doubt Grace Covenant would have been a place that assisted in the spread of COVID.

Which brings me to why I am preaching here, in my house, instead of in the sanctuary, where I had planned to be, where I wanted to be. And why Amy Kim and Richard are connecting to worship from their homes today instead of in the sanctuary where we had planned to be together.

My family has been so careful about COVID. John's double cancer diagnosis during COVID has made us hyper-vigilant. When Sidney comes home, he sleeps in the garage until he has a negative test. We mask everywhere we go, even in outdoor spaces where there are large crowds. We are all vaccinated. We don't have people in our house. We don't go into other people's houses. We don't go into restaurants. We are not going to any kinds of events indoors.

But Mary Elizabeth and John are back at school at AC Reynolds HS. And because so many people--including some students, some teachers, and some staff, are not vaccinated in many of our schools here in Asheville, COVID rates are climbing in many, many schools in our area.

And on Wednesday night Mary Elizabeth told us she felt sick. On Thursday morning she tested positive for COVID.

Some of you have had this experience, too. The demoralizing kick in the gut after all this effort, after all this careful attention to all the advice about how to lower your risk of exposure, after all this vigilance--after all of that, someone you live with or maybe you, still gets COVID.

Honestly I am too tired at this point for rage toward the unvaccinated. It's been an intense 18 months: John's two cancer diagnoses, my mom's cancer diagnosis, parenting children whose lives have been upended, completely retooling what ministry is and how we do church, trying to continue to do all the tasks that are included in the 24/7 job of being a pastor and head of staff in a church this size and this engaged. I have enough on my plate. I refuse to use my energy for rage toward the unvaccinated.

I can keep the rage at bay, but I can't keep the sorrow from washing over me that the human race struggles so much to love each other, that the human race struggles so much to take care of each other, to not be so witheringly self-destructive.

Thank God Mary Elizabeth is feeling better and has had a negative test now.. And John and I have both gotten negative test results back so far. Thank God we found out she had it and I could alert staff and they have all been feeling ok so far. Thank God for the Session mask mandate in the GCPC building.

Thank God we weren't all in church last Sunday because her symptoms had already started then. She just chalked them up to being tired from an intense week of school and hadn't mentioned anything to anyone. Pushing through like so many of us do. Thank God we ended up not going to see my mom and dad last weekend like we had planned.

There is much to be thankful for--and there is something clarifying about what happened this week. Something that feels a lot like what James would say to us about being people of faith in the days of COVID.

You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder.

You realize, that's what the human race is doing right now. Wanting something we don't have and being willing to murder to get it.

Wanting so much to be able to be back to some pre-COVID "normal," whatever that means, that we are willing to keep piling up the deaths of people. Over 673,000 deaths in the US alone. 4.55 million dead worldwide. And that increases in the US to the tune of about 2000 deaths a day right now--back to the highest rates we were seeing at the peak of the pandemic. And so many of these deaths are caused by so many people unwilling to shift their behavior--unwilling to see the Holy in the shifts that we are being asked to make.

Focusing instead on bitterness and envy. Just like James says.

Wanting so much to hold on to our habits of consumption and profit-generation and wealth concentration that we will let the planet burn around us. Wanting so much to do things our way that we ignore the even conservative estimate that about 10,000 species become extinct every year--somewhere between 1,000-10,000 times the natural extinction rate. It just depends on how many species are actually out there. We don't even know what we're losing.

Focusing instead on ambition and selfishness. Just like James says.

You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder.

That's why I am here at my home instead of the sanctuary. That's why you are home instead of the sanctuary. That's why GCPC has not succumbed to the temptation to go back to in person worship in the sanctuary yet. Because we are trying to be faithful. We are trying to listen to God's voice, to Jesus' invitation, to James' admonishment.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?

And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask.

Which brings me to this program year at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church and our theme, Holy Shift.

Sure, it's a little irreverent. But let's be honest, we're all just a little done with sugar coating the truth about what it means to be a person of faith in the world today.

Reverence has not done much to change humanity--it has done very little, in fact, to break the chains of oppression or heal broken relationships or transform dysfunctional systems and habits or shift the tide toward liberation.

Forget reverence, GCPC. We need a new relationship with the Holy.

Holiness isn't about a certain style of worship. Holiness is about the mystery of Divine Love infused into every second of our lives.

Holiness washing through us and among us--like the waters of baptism soaking us with promises of love that will never let us go, washing us in love that we promise to share with each other with the same kind of generosity and gentleness, healing and fidelity as God's love.

Shift is really about subtlety--the subtlety of slow change--of change over time from incremental steps toward a different way of being in and seeing the world.

How did normalcy conceal the Holy in your life? How has this time in the wilderness revealed the Holy in your life?

You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

We miss Holy Shifts because we get so twisted about what we really want--what we really, really want in our heart of hearts.

What do you want--is coming to church what you want? Or is a closer relationship to God what you want? Do you want comfort or do you want to be more faithful? Do you want to be around people or do you want right relationship with people?

Let's not mistake our ways of doing and being church for what it means to be faithful. Let's not mistake the sanctuary for the Sacred. Let's not mistake Reformed worship for God. Let's not make idols of what we like and what we want--our own pleasures, even when they are packaged as religion or spirituality.

Let's be honest, what does it really take to shake us out of our lethargy, what could create the conditions for us to shed the ways we had grown so accustomed to doing church, habits that may have been teetering dangerously close to losing touch with what the purpose of church actually is.

GCPC, the devil truly is in the details, in the things we think we have to have to be church. We forget that faith must be something that we can hold onto when we've lost everything for it to truly be faith.

Maybe these difficult days are testing your faith. Maybe the changes to what church feels like to you are making you feel disconnected from Grace Covenant. Maybe you wish we were a church that would just get back to normal. Maybe you feel like you are losing your church or even losing your faith.

Pay attention to those feelings--they are shaking something loose in you. They are making room for a shift. They are clearing space for you to recognize the Holy that infuses the shifts you are being asked to embrace.

I pray that each us calls Grace Covenant our church home for reasons other than:

- the sanctuary
- the pews
- how many parking spaces there are close to the building,
- whether we are worshipping in person again yet or not
- what Sunday school classes we offer
- because you've been a member for however many years
- the proximity of the church building to your house

- because you really love the community garden

The Spirit may have used those things to get you here.

But I pray you stay at GCPC, and commit yourself and your life to the practice of being beloved community at GCPC not because of any of those things.

I pray that no matter what brought you to GCPC that you stay because you believe with your heart and soul that this church:

- ...is living out the gospel of Jesus Christ,
- that our values as a community of faith help you draw near to God,
- that our practices as a community help break any bondage we have to the details the devil wants us to mistake for church.

James says:

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and the devil will flee from you.

Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.

Holy Shifts are happening every second of every day. We don't get to choose whether we participate in those shifts or not. We don't get to choose whether those shifts are Holy or not.

Your resistance, your distraction, your busyness, your complaints, your detachment--all of those are ways of participating. The question is not whether you are participating or not.

The question is:

- Is the way you are participating drawing you closer to God?
- Is the way you are participating opening your eyes, your heart, your body up to the Holy that is embracing us even now?
- Is the way you are participating bringing you into deeper relationship with yourself, with the world, with Divine mystery?

Grace Covenant, there is not one of you in this community who is not fiercely loved by me and by this staff and by this community. You are loved here. You are loved as you--just you--not what you produce, not what you give, not who you know or what your job is. You are loved because you are you!

And these Holy Shifts we're experiencing are for all of us--no matter your age, your social context, your experience with church growing up, your biases about what church should or should not be.

These Holy Shifts are gifts:

- gifts from the one who created us each in our own uniqueness,
- gifts from the one who redeems us each from the wounds that estrange us from each other, from ourselves, and from God,
- gifts from the one who sustains us in the worst trials and tribulations that life on earth can dish out--including the ones that have us in their grip right now in these tumultuous times.

I'd expect nothing less from the God who loves us whether we're stuck or spinning out of control.

God the supreme shape shifter.

God who consecrates the ordinary.

God who hallows our shadows.

God who liberates the captives.

God who frees us from the oppressions that have enslaved and enmeshed and ensnared generations of people who thought they were faithful, just like us.

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 those who make peace.

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and the devil will flee from you.

Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.

GCPC, please stay present to the miracle that these excruciating times carry with them. Could it finally be time for the shift we've needed all along?

(play Holy Shift video)