



“SHIFT HAPPENS”
SCRIPTURE: JAMES 5: 13-20
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
September 26, 2021
The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

James 5:13-20

5:13 Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.

5:14 Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.

5:15 The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.

5:16 Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

5:17 Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.

5:18 Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

5:19 My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another,

5:20 you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

The Word of the LORD
Thanks be to God.

[\(Play Grand Canyon Video\)](#)

The Grand Canyon is proof that shift happens--that permanence is a delusion. Shift happens whether we want it to or not, whether we are ready or not. Some shifts happen slowly. Like the Grand Canyon.

Some two billion years ago, the oldest layers of igneous and metamorphic rocks were formed. Those are the basement rocks. The layers build on each other, with sedimentary rocks forming on top of them. Somewhere between

30 and 70 Million years ago the earth shifted, it uplifted through shifts in tectonic plates creating the Colorado plateau. The layers of rock tell the story of shifting sediments--slow shifts and massive movements.

About 6 million years ago, the river began downcutting--cutting into the earth's rock to increase the depth of the canyon, carrying sediment and creating erosion that slowly, slowly, slowly makes the canyon wider and wider, too. The arid climate and the slope of the Colorado River make this such a striking example of these shifts over time. In another million years the canyon may be so wide you can't see across it anymore. It slowly gets deeper, too, but not as fast as it gets wider.

The very nature of life is shift. The question is not whether you will change or not, but how you give yourself to change? How do you position yourself in the shifts?

The rock formations of the Grand Canyon tell the story of huge chunks of time--changes in climate and changes in rock content and formation. The Grand Canyon also tells us the story of shifts of which there remains no trace.

(The Great Unconformity Image Split Screen)

The Great Unconformity is a period of time in the earth's history for which there is no geological accounting. The Grand Canyon gives one of the clearest views of this phenomenon that is found all over the world. 250 million year old rock is right next to 1.2 billion year old rock. And no one knows what happened to the millions of years in between those two periods. Massive shifts lost in the dusts of time.

(Take down Great Unconformity Image)

The Book of James provides a kind of spiritual geology, telling us the story of shifts over time--the massive uplifts, the slow eroding of old ways into a new landscape. The behavior James calls for in this passage are invitations to change, to shift, to practice something new in order to create something new.

The community James has been imploring in all these chapters and verses we've been exploring these last several weeks is in need of transformation.

James is inviting them to bring the intentionality of faith to how they contribute to the transformation formed through the shifts in behavior, shifts in community norms that faith invites. James decisively names the behaviors that need to be in place to change what is normal in that community.

These shifts in norms, these intentional actions that make things normal and normative that hadn't been before are all about the nature of relationship, the community's disposition toward vulnerability and piety, but most of all the community's disposition toward each other.

He wouldn't have needed to say these things if these behaviors were already normative.

That community was shaped by other values--greed, disparities in wealth, arrogance, hierarchies and social stratification, power imbalances, oppression, favoring the wants and desires of those who were well-resourced over those who were pushed to the margins more and more by those with resources.

It was a long, long time ago--and James' directives have since formed and informed many iterations of the Christian faith--including the anointing of the sick and prayer with those in distress.

James, throughout this letter, is seeking to impact the way this emerging community was becoming itself. He spoke directly to their actions, their self-awareness, their conscious embrace of a new way of being human together.

There are several ways for us to read James today--several ways that these words could impact us, deepen our faith, stretch our practices, reshape our normal.

After all these years, we live in a community that doesn't sound all that different than James'--acute social stratification based on wealth, those with resources given preferential treatment in how the community makes decisions, those with fewer resources pushed to the margins by generations and generations of privilege making decisions to cut new roads through neighborhoods (e.g. urban renewal), build hotels for tourists instead of affordable housing, create zoning laws that move people and resources around to suit those who have the resources to make things happen.

And all these generations later, those of us who call ourselves Christian in this community still need the correctives this biblical book has to offer us. James is talking about wearing new creek beds, changing the course of normalcy, changing our orientation toward people and things through massive shifts and slow shifts over time.

James calls to us from the basement rocks, the foundations of our faith to remind us that our faith will tell the story of its true character in its topography over time, in the stuff that is made from our relationships.

We can't say we are one thing, and then act another way. Our true formation is revealed in the ways we move in relationship to each other and in the ways our community and our context is formed over time.

All of the behaviors James names here are about vulnerability and trust--coming to each other in truth and transparency, trusting each other with our sorrow and our joy, our sickness and our thriving.

James is all about integrity, but he's also about waking up to the impact of our daily ways of life.

Shift happens sometimes slowly and sometimes dramatically.

Shift happens whether we want it to or not.

Shift happens in your life and mine--life altering moments where everything changes in the blink of an eye--a medical diagnosis, a car accident, the death of a parent, a spouse, a child, losing a job, finding out one's spouse doesn't want to be together anymore, deciding today's the day you are going to stop drinking, or today's the day you are going to leave that abusive relationship.

Shift happens. And James says through it all we should be praying together--letting ourselves be supported by each other, letting our lives be held by a network of people who we trust to love us and lift us up and hold us close.

James says we should understand the power of our actions over times, our practices, the way we are positioning our lives toward each other and toward what's normal in the larger community. James, unequivocally, is calling for a new normal--a new normal created by a community that prioritizes a new way of being in relationship--relationships can change the world!

When I was a young pastor serving a church far away from here, I went to the hospital to visit a parishioner who was in terrible pain. She had both chronic and acute health problems and her life was very, very different than it had been. The slow erosion of her capacity to move, to breath, to live without pain, to be the person she wanted to be was excruciating.

When I went to visit she welcomed me warmly. The conversation, however, told a different story. She diverted our conversation at every turn away from what was going on with her, toward other things like politics or the weather or what was happening in the news.

These were things she could have talked about with a stranger. I was her pastor, I was her sister in Christ.

It was clear that she was not open to being truthful with me about how she was feeling. The visit was wrapping up and I asked her if I could pray with her before I left.

“Oh I don’t believe in intercessory prayer,” she said. “There’s no need to pray for me. It won’t change anything.”

Let’s linger here for just a minute, Grace Covenant. Before you try to distance yourself from this sister in Christ from years ago and miles away, sit down with her for just a minute.

How do her words land with you? What do you feel? Where do you feel it? What does it sound like to your spiritual sensitivities and your inner-most spiritual secrets to hear someone tell her pastor there is no need to pray, that prayer won’t change anything?

That was the most honest thing she said to me that whole pastoral visit. The pain of being sick with no medical pathway to get back to health, the pain of only having the intellect deployed to be with someone who cared about her, the pain of having to let go of so much and of holding on to so much, too.

James speaks into that pain and says, pray. Pray when you are sick, pray when you are happy, pray when you are confused, pray when you are lonely. And

let other people pray for you--let the elders of the church pray for you. Prayer changes things. Prayer has an impact over time, over the geography, the landscape, the contours of our surroundings.

Prayer is about something shifting within us--away from isolation and certainty, toward connection and surrender, toward trust and transformation.

Do we really need to know everything about how prayer works to pray together or to let someone pray for us? Can we just be together in a way that embodies our deep desire for things to shift, for things to change, for our hearts to find peace and our relationships to heal?

The human brain, like the Grand Canyon, is malleable, changeable. The Colorado River of our brains is practice, intention, mentality, ideas, thoughts, prayers, hopes, and dreams--all the things that wear new pathways in our brains and make us more and more susceptible to certain behaviors over others.

Our thoughts and actions can create both slow and massive shifts over time. They do change us--we do change. Human beings are shape-shifters.

With all our talk about how much people don't like change or don't want to change, the truth is human beings are actually wired to change. We are constantly changing--in every moment our bodies are both renewing and shedding, dying and being reborn.

In fact, the misconception that our identity is fixed once we become an adult is false consciousness. Brain science calls the misconception "identity foreclosure." Thinking our identity is fixed is a misconception that actually closes our minds off to possibilities. It keeps us from having an "exploratory mind." An exploratory mind is open to new experiences, new ways of seeing things, to hopes and dreams for the future.

Our brains are actually very malleable. And identity is changing all the time. We are changed over time. Traumatic experiences are transformative as well as positive experiences. Both change our personality.

Seeing our identities as fixed only makes the inevitable shifts feel more stressful than they actually need to be.

Laurie Santos on the Happiness Lab describes our “**psychological immune system.**” We build narratives to find ways to make sense of what is happening to us. And if we can craft narratives that mitigate the bad consequences of what is happening to us, we build healthier relationships and communities. This is what brain scientists call a **growth mindset. Our mindsets** actually affect how we change. *If you believe you can change, the changes we experience tend to be more positive and life-giving.*

All human beings do change, and all human beings can change. We can change our beliefs, our behaviors, our identities, our relationships. The brain is elastic, like other muscles.

Santos says human beings “reliably underestimate” how resilient we are. Our emotions can sometimes tell us we won’t be able to deal with change when it comes, when we actually can and will deal with the change when it comes.

If we approach change with self awareness (Santos: how am I interacting with this change?), and with the willingness to develop our muscles of sitting with uncertainty and riding waves of difficult emotions, then change is more often growth inducing.

The other thing about human beings and change is that sometimes we’re more open to change when we see ourselves at a turning point in our lives. It’s called the “fresh start effect.” When things are changing, we are more open to other changes. Like “I’m starting a new job today, so I am also going to start a new exercise routine, too.”

Life disruptions can lead to explorations. Times of disruption are when we can experiment, when we can explore, when we can shift.

It’s kind of the opposite of what some people seem to think about times of social upheaval--when everything is changing, many people say “slow down, we need some things to stay the same.” Actually, our bodies and brains don’t work that way at all! For good or for ill, when everything is changing, our brains are actually more open to suggestions.

James would say, use it for good, use it for healing and the uplift of the community. Shift happens, and embracing those shifts in faith means welcoming the new possibilities these shifts bring to us as people of faith.

How can we use the “fresh start effect” as a church? Behaviors that accompany identity shifts are more likely to stand the test of time. The more exploration and experimentation are our community norms, the more we will grow in times of great change.

That’s one reason GCPC is holding up in such amazing ways during the massive shifts we are undergoing. Our community norms have included trying new things, experimenting, messing up and trying again, giving each other grace in the midst of exploring God’s call for us. All of this was true about GCPC before COVID.

And now COVID is changing us. And how we orient ourselves to these shifts is going to be a big part of how these massive shifts shape our future.

How do we seize this opportunity--the malleability of church and community, this disruption of massive proportions--and embrace the transformation?

James would say, shift happens, embrace it as people of faith. Embrace the way God is using the shifts to transform you and to transform the world.

Thanks be to God.