



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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The Journey [5th week] . . .

THE UNLIKELY ROUTE TO JOY

Scripture: James 1:2-5

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INTRODUCTION

Today is **Palm Sunday**, and we come to a peculiar place in our journey.

You probably thought we would come into a city, and there would be a tremendous welcoming party—like Jesus encountered when he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey.

But I'm looking on my **MAP**, and it looks like we're coming to some *dangerous waters*. . .and, there's a gigantic *sea monster* that looks pretty terrifying.

That large creature has a label in the Old Testament: **LEVIATHAN**

LEVIATHAN is a generic name for a huge creature of the sea:

- Sometimes the Leviathan is pictured as a harmless creature that frolics with all the other living things, large & small, in the vast and spacious oceans, like a Manatee. [cf. Psalm 104:26]
- Sometimes the Leviathan is pictured as a huge serpent or crocodile that is very dangerous. There's a great portrayal of Leviathan in Job 41:8-9:

"If you lay a hand on Leviathan, you will remember the struggle and never do it again! Any hope of subduing him is false; the mere sight of him is overpowering."

- Sometimes the Leviathan represents world rulers that overpowered Israel (e.g.: Pharaoh of Egypt; Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon). [cf. Ezekiel 32:2; Isaiah 27:1]

Leviathan is often used in the Old Testament as a symbol of EVIL—just as the DRAGON is used to refer to SATAN.

Whether Leviathan is a nation, a superpower, the rulers-authorities-powers of this dark world that work to defeat us (cf. Eph. 6:12), or something more personal such as a temptation or a compulsion (i.e.: something that's too big for us), or the trials & fiery ordeals we go through. . .

One thing is certain: Leviathan is dangerous & overpowering, forceful & sometimes violent.

There's a great promise in Isaiah 27:1 (one of the places where Leviathan is mentioned):

“The Lord will punish (Leviathan) with his sword, his great & powerful sword. . .He will slay the monster of the sea.”

This morning we’re using Leviathan to represent the trials—the burdens & cares, the things that weigh us down, troubles, hardships, distresses, things that keep us awake at night.

We all have a Leviathan in our lives! And if not, somewhere along the line we are going to encounter a Leviathan!

That brings us to our Scripture this morning, found in **James 1:2-5**. . .

²Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. ⁵If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

What an UNLIKELY ROUTE TO JOY! Yet it is the route Jesus took (as we shall see later on).

Let’s break it down word-by-word and phrase-by-phrase this morning.

EXPOSITION

Whenever [*“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials. . .”*]

It’s “when” not “if”. Believers are not specially shielded from trials. We have no extra insurance coverage, no special exemption.

Rick Warren in his book *The Purpose-Driven Life* says that “no one is immune to pain or insulated from suffering. . .no one skates through life problem-free. Life is a series of problems. You solve one, another one is waiting.” That’s why Peter writes (in I Peter 4:12-13):

“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial that you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed.”

Trials of Many Kinds [*“Whenever you face trials of many kinds.”*]

Trials come in all sizes & shapes. Yours are not the same as someone else’s.

What we tend to do is compare our trials with those of others:

- Our path seems harder, more burdensome.
- We get pretty good at singing “*Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen*”

Or, we go to the opposite extreme, and play down what we’re facing:

- “Maybe I will be laid off, but no big deal.”
- “Maybe this health problem is serious, but I can’t admit I’m scared.”
- “Maybe my kids are starting to run with the wrong crowd, but I can’t control their every action”, and we turn our heads the other way.

In the world of counseling, we call this “*minimizing*”.

Whether we're *maximizing* or *minimizing*. . .calling *undo attention to* or *denying*. . .*playing it down* or *playing it up* – all of us are called to ***persevere***.....

Perseverance [*“...the testing of your faith develops perseverance.”*]

Perseverance is endurance: making it over the long haul.

No matter what comes. . .no matter what I face. . .no matter what surprises pop up, I will stand firm. That's where the wisdom and maturity come from; they're born out of perseverance.

Perseverance is the ability to say NO to all the wrong options. . .all the temporary solutions that end up being just the easy way out. It is saying NO to the escape hatches we set up for ourselves to alleviate our circumstances. Sometimes there is no way around something. . .only through it.

Some of you are facing difficult conditions which may never go away. The desire to escape comes often. . .and is natural. Perseverance is the determination to remain under it and give God all the room He needs to form (shape) your character. That's how he wants to use trials in our life.

I'm not sure we should pray our way out of every difficulty that comes into our life. We might miss something God wants to show us or weave into the fabric of our lives. So, we need to hang in there and allow Him to accomplish His perfect work.

James says welcome the trials & tests that come—with **joy!** with **glee!**

“You've got to be kidding,” you say. “You don't know what I have to contend with.” “I'm at the breaking point!” “You don't know what's staring me in the face concerning my future.” “There's no easy way out of this. . .in fact, there's no way out at all.” “So, how can you say that?”

I didn't. . .James did!

I don't mean that as a cop-out. What I'm saying, I'm saying on the authority of Scripture:

- God is more powerful than LEVIATHAN. . .more powerful than anything that can come against you.
- Don't you know that “*His strength is made perfect in your weakness*” [cf. II Corinthians 12:9]
- Don't you know where all this is leading?

God never allows trials to tear you down. . .but to build you up into the person He created you to be. So, stop fearing the future. . .start forging the future. Let's get away from the apathetic “*I hope God comes through*”. . .and start saying “*God, send me through.*”

Mature and Complete [*“Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature & complete.”*]

The Greek word is “*teleios*”. It is actually better translated “*perfect*”. But it doesn't mean “flawless”; it means something has reached its full capacity.

A full-grown tree is “*teleios*”. We become “*teleios*” by enduring.

We don't become “sinless”. But we do grow up. . .we do become mature. . .we do become strong. We do see changes in our character, priorities, attitudes, feelings, perspective.

Not Lacking Anything [*“...be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”*]

You may not feel “up” to facing all that you are facing. You may not feel “adequate” (i.e.: strong enough or wise enough). And you aren’t. . .but He is! He is everything you need. With Him, you lack nothing.

But you’ll never know that God is all you need until God is all you’ve got. And trials are the way of gaining that knowledge.

Rick Warren points out that if God had kept Joseph out of jail, Daniel out of the lion’s den, Jeremiah from being tossed into a slimy pit, Paul from being shipwrecked three times, the three Hebrew young men from being thrown into a blazing furnace—chances are none of these characters would have drawn as close to God as they did.

God uses these ordeals in our lives to draw us closer to Him:

- Some say trials prove that God is NOT good (as we say He is every Sunday).
- Some say trials are God’s way of punishing us (not true, unless we bring it on ourselves).
- Some say trials are discipline, education (that is partially correct).
- Some say trials will lead you to bitterness.
- But I say, let them drive you to unabated dependence on Him.

It’s the unlikely route to JOY, WISDOM, SPIRITUAL MATURITY. But that’s where we end up.

It’s the route Jesus took:

It was “for the joy set before Him that He endured a shameful death on the cross. Now he sits in the place of honor, right alongside God.” [cf. Hebrews 12:2]

APPLICATION

I can’t tell you how many times as a PASTOR (here & other places) I have stood alongside people struggling with the mysteries of life:

- People who thought they were going to have a Jack-n-Jill life.
- People who thought they were going to have an Ozzie-n-Harriet family.
- But it didn’t happen the way it should’ve. Things didn’t turn out the way they were expected, thought, or planned.
- Believe me, I’ve been there too!

Just this week. . .

- Becky M. was in the hospital 6 days instead of 2; minor surgery turned into major.
- I conducted the funeral of a man who had cancer. . .thought he might be beating it. . . then died unexpectedly of a heart attack.
- We had a couple in the first church I pastor who had been childless for years. . .then they conceived. . .but the child was still-born.
- How many here have lost a child? [It’s NOT the way things are supposed to happen!]

IT'S A PACKAGE DEAL! There are blessings & breakthroughs. . .tragedies & traumas. There are celebrations (times to laugh & dance). . .and occasions to weep & mourn (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:4).

It's reflected in our Christian calendar. . .

- CHRISTMAS: God came to dwell among us. It's a joyful celebration; we sing "*Joy to the World*". The season holds such promise, such hope. Now everything's going to be OK. But it isn't. We come now to the events of.....
- HOLY WEEK / to the PASSION & DEATH OF CHRIST: Jesus makes His entrance into Jerusalem the Sunday before He is crucified to the praises & accolades of the crowd, only to be handed over to the Roman soldiers for one of the most brutal beatings & deaths in recorded history.

PALM SUNDAY and GOOD FRIDAY come so close together. It reminds us that *comedy & tragedy* go hand in hand (in theatre, the comedic and tragic faces are placed right next to each other). Both *joy & sorrow* are part of our experience. This week, they will bump into each other once again. Sometimes they do in our lives, too.

- EASTER SUNDAY MORNING and RESURRECTION: Now, for sure, everything will be OK. Christ is risen! Sin, Satan, and Death are conquered. Still the world would go unredeemed. To this day, many centuries later, it still is to a large extent.

There's a strange irony in all of this!

The very reason Christ came to dwell among us (i.e.: to bring redemption) is, at first glance, mocked by the tragedies—great & small—that continue to invade our lives.

But Christ's triumph on the Cross AND His resurrection on Easter morning do not guarantee there will be no more tragedy, no more sickness or tears. That's left for another day! We as people of faith live by the promise of God's Word that "*the day of our redemption is drawing near*" [cf. Luke 21:28].

Today it may seem far away, elusive, even illusive. But let's put things in perspective [perspective is like the background on the canvas]. There is coming a day—another day—completely unlike this one. Can there be a more beautiful description than the one John, the Apostle, gives in Revelation 21:3-4?

"Look, the home of God is now among His people! He will live with them, and they will be His people. God Himself will be with them. He will remove all of their sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. For the old world and its evils are gone forever."

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ENDING [cf. I Peter 5:6-7]

Did you notice the path? It doesn't end in "troubled water". You will walk out of it someday, somehow. So, humble yourselves under God's mighty hand, and He will lift you up in due time. Take time to thank God for what He is doing in your life. . .and ask Him for eternal perspective.

May He show His power against the LEVIATHANS in your life this week.