

HOMECOMING SUNDAY | SERMON

Proverbs 1:20-33 • James 3:1-12 • Mark 8:27-38 • Rev. Catherine Healy • 12 Sept. 2021

I bet at least one of you here has chosen or been assigned a “life verse,” a single line of the Bible meant to speak especially to you. A life verse can be a powerful thing, but it’s also sorely tempting to take your verse out of context. For example, I have considered making a cross-stitch of Paul’s complaint in 1 Corinthians 9:6: “Or is it only Barnabas and I who have to work for a living?!”

Since my wife teaches middle school, I sometimes tell her that her life verse should be James 3:1: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”

James is talking about teachers of the Gospel. But his warning has a certain resonance for many of the teachers I know. We all learned just how hard a job teaching can be at the beginning of the pandemic, when teachers’ jobs were

reinvented overnight. I got to see this heroic reinvention firsthand from our living room, and our bedroom, and our kitchen, and our hallway floor.

A year and a half later, it’s hard to remember just how much we were all scrambling. Teachers and academics weren’t the only ones whose jobs were reinvented with no warning. Parents became accidental homeschoolers. Health care and retail workers found themselves on the “front lines” of a war they had never signed up to fight. One attorney friend of mine made herself a “Zoom Court Bingo Card,” with squares like “Smoker lights up on camera” and “Defendant accidentally signs off with ‘Love you, bye.’”

Worse than the professional struggles, for most of us, were the personal ones. Anguish over the risk of attending birthdays, weddings, funerals. Months separated from loved ones. For those who

live alone, months separated from *everybody*. For those who don't live alone, the discovery that marriage, family, and roommate relationships are a little more stressful when you're all trapped in the same house twenty-four hours a day.

"Not many of you should tackle life in a global pandemic, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who have lived through this time will be judged with greater strictness."

Enduring this time is, in itself, an enormous achievement. If it's felt apocalyptically hard, that's because it has been. If it's threatened to break your spirit or turned you into a person that even you don't recognize, God only knows you are not alone.

And yet, after such a long period of endurance, we have so much to celebrate. Today is our Homecoming Sunday, and this year it feels especially sweet. This morning our children's and youth rooms will be full of noise and joy and learning for the first time in a year and a half. Our choirs are returning. We're preparing for

Haiti Sunday and Youth Sunday and a wonderful year ahead.

Like us, our worship looks a little different than it did before. Like us, our church is changed by what it's been through. But that doesn't mean those changes are bad. For everything we are out of practice at, we are also wiser and more tuned in to what really matters: our love for God and one another.

So what better way to honor this day of celebration than with these extremely depressing and scary readings from the Bible?

It's not easy to read these texts and find any comfort. After so many hundreds of thousands of needless deaths, how can we not flinch at "Waywardness kills the simple, and the complacency of fools destroys them"?

We all know by now that it doesn't work that way. Plenty of complacent people get lucky. Plenty of wise and thoughtful people still suffer terrible things.

COVID brings the falseness of this dichotomy especially close to home, but

it's not a new development. Being a good person is no protection against suffering. It never has been.

But Proverbs is an interesting book. In many places, it's not meant to be the voice of God telling us what *should* happen, but the voice of humans trying to explain what is *already* happening.

It feels like wisdom has completely departed our public discourse. That's already happening. All around us, still, is suffering and death. That's already happening.

Waywardness and complacency can kill. Boy, do we know that's already happening.

And it is only human to struggle with the temptation to draw a straight line from waywardness to punishment. Maybe in March of 2020, we could still believe that only bad, careless people would suffer and die from COVID, and the we, the good, careful people, would be safe.

If we have listened to the voice of wisdom at all, we don't believe that now.

The messier truth underneath this weird reading from Proverbs is the same one expressed in the letter of James: We have a collective responsibility to one another. Waywardness and complacency *can* kill. But they don't always kill the people who are wayward and complacent. We keep masking and distancing and getting vaccinated, not to show that we are the right kind of people, but to protect the most vulnerable among us. And taking counsel from James, we keep control over our tongues—or maybe, in this age, our keyboards—and are mindful of what we say, not to show how smart we are, but because we now know well that misinformation kills and the truth can save lives.

And when all of this responsibility feels like too much, when ordinary life—if we can call any of this ordinary—feels like too much, we take our fears and hopes and exhaustion and we turn to Jesus.

Not because he will make the road easy. But because he walked his own very hard road, and he will not desert us when we are walking ours.

Not because he promises us riches or even safety. But because he promises us perfection in love, and we all deserve to know what it is to be perfectly loved.

Jesus tells us that to follow him, we will have to give up everything except for what really matters: our love for God and one another.

But wait a second. We know how to do that now.

We understand what it means to take up our own cross. We understand what it means to make extraordinary sacrifices to care for one another.

We have given up the lives we had before, and it hurt. But Jesus promises us that through this pouring out of ourselves, we can become ever more like him, and ourselves grow perfect in love.

The pandemic is not over. We have much more work ahead of us, and we are still walking a hard road. But we also have so many good things coming our way.

Maybe it's true that not many of us initially had what it took to endure a global pandemic. But by the grace of

God, the companionship of Jesus and the love of the Holy Spirit—and the grace, companionship, and love that God empowers us to show to one another—we will keep on making it through.