

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

September 26, 2021 – PENTECOST 18 / PROPER 21B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*The Prayer of Faith*”

Numbers 11:10-16, 24-29	(God responds to the people’s complaints against Moses.)
Psalms 19:7-14	(The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.)
James 5:13-20	(Pray for each other and confess sins, and you will be healed.)
St. Mark 9:38-50	(Jesus teaches right conduct.)

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Wisdom and faith are the two great themes that run through the book of James. Scripture calls us to live by the wisdom that comes from above—that is, God—rather than the so-called wisdom of the world, of the culture around us. The world says “don’t get mad, get even.” The Bible says, “Turn the other cheek, and forgive.” Our society urges us to get ahead at all costs, but, as we heard last Sunday, Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

The same is true with faith. The world is oriented toward facts, and what can be proven scientifically. But the Bible tells us in Hebrews 11:1 “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” I often say there’s a fine line between having faith and being insane, because in both circumstances, people are believing something they can’t see. The difference is, *faith* is grounded in God, who may not be seen, but can be *experienced*.

If we have living and active faith, it will be seen in how we live. Crazy people only do nutty things. But people of faith do the things of God, spreading: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control—as we are told in Galatians 5:22-23.

Our faith is not only for doing good for others, it is what sustains us through our life’s journey, and what gets us into heaven at the end of trip. In today’s verses from James, the apostle connects our faith to the trials, troubles, sicknesses, and difficulties of life, because one of the most significant ways our faith connects to life is through prayer. He starts by asking: “Are any among you suffering?” “Are any among you sick?” The answer to both is prayer, either our own, or calling upon others in the church to pray with us.

James goes on to say: “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” This could be both an encouraging and a discouraging verse. You might be thinking, “Well, who is a righteous person? Does this mean only the prayers of Jesus, or some saint, will be effective?” Ah, but let’s look at the actual Greek text. It says the prayer of “*pisteos*” which means faith. It has nothing to do with whether you are good enough, or righteous enough. This verse talks about praying with faith—and Jesus says your faith might only be the size of a tiny mustard seed, and it will be powerful!

To illustrate his point, James brings up the prophet Elijah, saying he “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. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.”

When you first hear that story, it sounds so simple. Elijah prayed and it didn’t rain for three years and six months. He prayed again and the sky poured rain. But there’s more to the story: In 1 Kings 18:42-44, we read: “Elijah went up to the top of Carmel and he crouched down on the earth and put his face between his knees. He said to his servant, ‘Go up now, look toward the sea.’ So he went up and looked and said, ‘There is nothing.’ And he said, ‘Go back’ seven times. It came about on the seventh time, that he said, ‘Behold, a cloud as small as a man’s hand is coming up from the sea.’ And he said, ‘Go up, say to Ahab, ‘Prepare your chariot and go down, so that the heavy shower does not stop you.’”

There's great insight to be gained from this story. Many of us would have prayed once and if God didn't answer, we would have stopped. But Elijah *persisted* in prayer, lifting his need up to the Lord seven times. Now, God didn't need Elijah's prayer to make it rain, but the Lord wants us to be included in what He's doing—healing, mercy, miracles, provision, deliverance, and so on. One way He brings us into His good work is through our prayers.

Over the past few months and weeks, we have seen the effectiveness of prayer within our own parish: Cheryl's father, who was on hospice care, is now doing much better—not dying. James' Dad, Clair is also greatly improved after having cancer surgery and some cardiac issues. Linda has been pretty sick and her doctors were afraid she might have COVID. But after many prayers, we found out she doesn't. Praise the Lord! Joan couldn't get any help for her extremely painful knee because her doctors wouldn't take her seriously. So we prayed for a good new doctor, and she just had a knee replacement. Hank was in the hospital twice, and even got COVID there—but we prayed hard and he is both asymptomatic and now home. God heals in response to faith, but also to *stir up faith!* When we hear good news in response to prayer, it does strengthen our faith.

How and why are our prayers effective? When we pray, God's spirit works *with us* to intervene. Psalm 91:15 (NCV) tells us, "They will call to me, and I will answer them. I will be with them in trouble; I will rescue them and honor them."

Now, we know that our prayers, even those offered with great faith, are not always answered as we would hope. Yet, we are still promised that Jesus is with us throughout every disappointment and defeat. In John 16:33 (Aramaic Bible), our Lord assures us: "I have spoken these things to you so that you shall have peace *in me*. You shall have suffering in the world, but take heart, I have overcome the world." And at the end of Matthew, Jesus promises that He will be with us until the end of the world. This must be both our hope and comfort when prayers go unanswered.

James reminds us that whether we're suffering or cheerful, we should turn to God. When we have troubles, pray. If things are going well, sing praises. Either way, look to God for help and consolation. In the words of Psalm 121:1-2: "I will lift up my eyes to the hills; where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth."

When things start going wrong many people become discouraged; it's easy to become depressed; and we become fixated on how large our troubles are. But when we pray, it shifts our focus away from ourselves and our circumstances, and toward God Almighty, who, as Ephesians 3:20 (NIV) reminds us, "is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us." And if we feel spiritually weak and unable to articulate prayers, we need to remember 2 Corinthians 12:9, where the Lord says, "my grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Sometimes, God works most powerfully when we just silently open our hearts, minds, and souls to Him, and don't say anything.

James goes on to talk about the role of healing prayer in the Church. In verses 14 & 15, "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." Healing prayer along with anointing with oil is not just a symbol, it is a means of God's grace, and as such, a Sacrament. Anointing opens up a path for the Holy Spirit to work, so that if someone is miraculously healed when we prayed, it wasn't because of us, but was done by the Holy Spirit. Even so, God has graciously allowed to participate in this!

The natural state of this broken world is corruption. Evil, sickness, and pain prevail. Yet God intervened by sending His Son to seek and to save that which was lost. He is concerned about our souls and pursues us so that we might be reconciled to Himself. Through this, we can see that God always intervenes with a purpose. That is why He sent His Son to heal the blind, the deaf, the lame, the demon-possessed, and those who were sick.

When John the Baptist heard about the works of Jesus, he sent his disciples to ask of Him, “Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for another?” Jesus answered, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Matthew 11:3-5.)

The Lord also promises to forgive our sins, along with healing our diseases. Sin may cause physical sickness—if we mistreat our bodies or do not avail ourselves of good remedies. But sin most certainly sickens our souls, and since the healing of our souls has eternal significance, God is most concerned about our repentance and salvation.

Scripture tells us that our bodies are only temporary dwellings, and the older we get, the more war-torn and ragged they become. However, as St. Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 4:16-17 (NIV), “We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away ... inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” When troubles come, whether in this world, or in our personal lives, that’s what we should try to focus on—the eternal glory that will outweigh them all. And, *keep praying*, in whatever way you can!

A father was trying to help his three-year-old daughter with her prayers. Apparently, when she said grace, she kept repeating the same few words, something like: “Bless this food, in Jesus name.” After their talk, the father couldn’t help but smile, because the little girl prayed: “God, bless our food, and I mean *really, really, really* bless our food. Amen!”\*

Let us pray:

Lord, give us grace to continue in prayer for all the many needs of which we are aware; to be as persistent as Elijah, and as open as this little girl to ramping up our intercessions, for we know that You are with us, and able to answer and to provide. All this we pray in Jesus’ Name. Amen.

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\* Adapt. <<https://www.calvaryhillsboro.org/watch-listen/messages/rich-jones-2017-02-26-james-513-20>> 24 September 2021. Used with permission.