

Uniting Our Storytelling with Our Story-Living

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[0 : 00] The scripture reading today comes from the book of James, chapter 5. Please read along in your bulletin. Be patient then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming.

See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.

Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged, for the judge is standing at the door. Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this.

Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins. This is God's word. Good morning, Watermark.

[1 : 21] In case you don't know me, my name is Mike. I work with the university students here at the church. And before Easter, we have been going through the book of James. So in case that this is the first time or you haven't heard the sermon series before Easter, we'll kind of recap that a little bit as well.

But today we will actually be finishing that sermon series with chapter 5, the final chapter of the book of James. And kind of to ease into the topic, I wanted to share a story, something that I have been following lately.

And you may have been following that too. And it was just mentioned in the prayer. It's about the increasing tension about North Korea. There's a lot of stuff in the newspapers that you read all over.

But there's also, on a personal note, something that made me quite interested. So we have some friends that work with an NGO and they have a growing presence up in North Korea. And just hearing the stories of what's happening in the country and among the people, it's been really touching and made me more interested.

And so just a few days ago, there was this documentary, I think it was the National Geographic, about North Korea. And what it showed was footage from a pretty strange event. So in the footage that they showed in the documentary, there was this room, this auditorium, with hundreds of North Koreans gathered.

[2 : 38] And they all had been blind. Some from birth and some had turned blind later in their lives. And they all had gone through eye surgery. So the footage now showed these people after surgery with their eyes all still covered.

So this whole room is full with people that all have these bandages on. And so now one after the other comes to the front of the room. And they take off the bandages. And what they're all facing is this huge picture of Kim Il-sung, the first leader of North Korea, who after his death had been declared the eternal leader of the country.

So he established, and I just tried to confirm that with my Korean friends, the Juche ideology, which is basically the ideology of putting Korean things first.

So the Juche ideology is one of total self-reliance of Korea, basically trying to, in an economic and a political way, be independent from anyone else. It requires total loyalty to both the country and the party.

So in the documentary, the people, as they opened their eyes, they would take a glance of this portrait of their leader and they would fall on their knees and cry and sob and begin to praise and worship their great general.

[4 : 03] And so one or the other would say things like, my family will worship the great general for generations to come. And under tears, they would say things like, praise you, eternal leader.

I will work even harder in the salt mines. And just watching that from an outside perspective, I was wondering, do they really mean that?

Like, have they really devoted their lives to this ideology and to the leader in that way? Obviously, there has been some brainwashing going on over generations about this ideology.

Any other information from the outside is kept away. All the information that is passed on through the media is screened. And so I was wondering whether they meant what they were saying or whether it was more of a fear that caused them to say what they were saying and influence their responses.

It's like a little over a year ago when the last supreme leader, Kim Jong-il, died, a reporter said that was in the country that the authorities were now handing down at least six months in a labor training camp for anybody who didn't participate in the organized gatherings during the mourning period or who did participate but didn't cry or didn't seem genuine.

[5 : 22] And so when I read that, I felt like, how can you force someone to be genuine in their hearts? So seeing all this and hearing all this brought a lot of memories back to me.

I grew up in a divided Germany. And I was exposed to an ideological clash between the capitalist democratic system on the one side, the Marxist communism on the other side.

And that was something on a regular basis that I was confronted with more in a subtle way. But my dad actually fled from eastern Germany on the last train out of the country before they closed the border, before they divided the countries.

So I grew up with this perception that everything communist is bad. It's an ideology not to be affirmed. As a family, we traveled a lot, but we never traveled to the east.

But when we traveled into communist territory was only when we would go to the divided eastern Germany. About once a year, we would visit relatives and friends.

[6 : 26] And it was a hustle to get the visa and getting through the customs area. And then we would meet our friends and experiencing what was on the other side was a really strange experience.

And I still remember smuggling toilet paper over because we didn't like the toilet paper there. And bringing paint over because they wouldn't have it.

And all the kids would complain. So even though the government tried to control TV and media, and they had secret police everywhere, everyone could be a spy, so people were afraid of who was screening who.

But still, I knew that the people in eastern Germany largely did not support what was going on. But they wouldn't speak out about it. So what was in their heart was often very different to what we would see in their action.

So the ideology they proclaimed to the outside was not what they really believed in. A good friend, and this is one of these examples, a good friend of my father had made his way up to be the general manager of an East German construction company.

[7 : 39] He actually had to get to that point through pretending that he was in line with everything the government said. But then in 1984, he revealed his heart and wrote an appeal to the government to let him and his family leave eastern Germany to go to the capitalist west.

Within a week, he was degraded to be the caretaker of the company. His kids were not allowed to go to university. They had to drop out of school.

And then three years of humiliation and threats followed situations like going to the bakery, and in the bakery, someone would tap on the shoulder and say, you better follow what the government says.

But then one day, he got a letter, and the letter said, hereby we inform you that you have 24 hours, and it was delivered to the door, hereby we inform you you have 24 hours to leave the country.

And so they could only pack a suitcase, they had to leave their car, their house, their families, and within a day, they left everything behind. And I still remember the day when we went to the border to pick them up. And it was unreal.

[8 : 51] And there are so many other stories that two years later, when the wall fell, and just seeing how people started to respond to what they had really experienced. But all these stories of Korea and what I've experienced back then, they remind me a lot of what's going on in the book of James.

It's like a reality check. It's about uniting our faith, that story about life and truth that we say we believe, with the story that we actually live out in our lives.

The story that we believe in our hearts. So James is asking that question. What we proclaim as a belief system, does it match the way we act?

Or are we pretending? Over the past few weeks, we have examined the first four chapters, and we have heard James say, faith without works is dead.

So that if we proclaim the Christian story as truth in our lives, if we say that we have faith in Jesus and his story of redemption, but then our action does not speak the same message, then what we say we believe has no meaning.

[10 : 01] It's dead. Christian scholar James Smith puts it in the following words. The Christian's primary responsibility is to live God's story for the world.

The church is a stage where God's drama is played out. As such, our responsibility is to act his story out well. Our storytelling should be supported by our story living.

Let me say that one more time. Our storytelling, the story we tell what we believe, should match our story living, the way we act in our lives. What we have seen in James over the past few weeks is that the church there struggled with that.

They united under that calling of restoring and redeeming the world and each other's lives. But when it got tough, they kept the money to themselves.

They wouldn't care about each other. Instead of following Jesus' example of selflessness, they would become selfish. We also saw that when it got tough to live out that story, instead of loving each other as a family, they began to turn on each other.

[11 : 10] They began to gossip, to criticize. So when looking at their works, their action towards one another, their story living, was not consistent with the gospel story that they said that they believed in.

So today's chapter also talks about how easy it is to give up on the story we say we believe, especially when it gets tough. Our text starts with verse 7.

Be patient then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crops, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains.

You too be patient and stand firm because the Lord's coming is near. So that great story again that we talk about is God's story of redemption. It's the belief that God, who created everything, came into his broken creation in the person of Jesus.

And that in his resurrection that we celebrated last week, we also see his power to restore everything. We see that he comes to redeem broken lives.

[12 : 16] We see that he will one day come back to restore all things. And that's what in verse 7 and 8 is highlighted twice, that it's until the Lord's coming so that the Lord will come back to restore all things.

But in the meanwhile, be patient. They need to stand firm and cling to that story even when it gets tough. So James gives an example of a farmer, a farmer who waits on the land to yield its crops and patiently waiting on the autumn and spring rains.

Now some of you know that I have somewhat of a background from a farming community like Tobin. My grandma, the family, lived at the Black Sea and they were in this farming community.

And so even when they left and moved back to Germany after the war, we always had a piece of land. they always wanted to be somewhat self-sustainable. So I would spend my time picking fruit and we would actually even raise ducks and rabbits for eating.

But then there's this element of farming that somehow clicks with me there. Like I remember as a 10-year-old kid going up to my granddad and the whole day on a Saturday I would plow the ground and prepare it to sow the potatoes and put the potatoes in the ground.

[13 : 36] And if I would know that there is no outcome whatsoever, like I would say, what's the reason of this? But you would plow the ground and then you would sow and then you would wait for rain and then you would have to go over it to pull out the weeds week after week.

And after you do all that, who would say, hey, okay, that's just taking too long. I'm out of here. I'm abandoning my field before you got the harvest. And so here's what James is talking about, that he trusted at the end it's all worth it, that there will be a harvest even when the tough plowing and the tough times go by, that we know what the end of the story is.

And God's story of redemption finishes in the patient waiting of his coming kingdom. And in a way he says, there's victory or a victory. Either God will lead you through the bad times and you will see the harvest here or there will be victory when he comes again.

But so easily we lose our patience when things don't turn out the way we want. I consider myself a pretty patient person. There's not too much that gets me anxious or angry, at least not in everyday situations.

as long as things are kind of like in my comfort zone and go in a normal way. But how does it look like under stress? Or when worries break in and they're built up and you just can't really organize life.

[15 : 04] And you probably have all been at that place and suddenly you see the worst coming out of yourself and you thought you're such a patient person. And then for me doubts come up like, why the heck do we give up like a job in banking and nursing to move to Hong Kong to work in ministry?

Or isn't there a better life? And shouldn't we just do that? And so it's kind of like you plow the ground and you sow the seed but then you feel like I don't want to wait for the harvest because I want to look for something better.

The French philosopher Jean-Francois Loitar says that today people have what he calls an incredulity towards metanarratives. Or in other words, there is a strong disbelief toward grand ideologies or grand narratives.

So these claims of universal truth. Let me give you an example. Over the past 50 years, there has been this grand cultural narrative on Hong Kong that has been influenced by the handover.

A lot of people that have been living through these times in the 70s, 80s, 90s leading up to the handover, they share that there has been that fear about what would happen in 10, 20, 30 years down the road when the handover happens.

[16 : 22] And so this narrative culturally that was written was we have to work very hard to make a lot of money so that we can move to Canada, to the UK, to Australia. And some people wonder why would you ever move there?

So you make a lot of money and then you move there and then you get citizenship and then everything will be okay. But even now after the handover, the great cultural narrative of Hong Kong still seems to be very influenced by that.

We just need to get, like, oh, I have a job, but three months later I get a better job offer so I better get to the job offer where I make \$1,000 more so that I can get ahead of the game. But now, I'm working with university students and what I'm seeing is that there's a new generation that is not that sold out to that grand cultural narrative.

Maybe there's something more meaningful like my first boyfriend or girlfriend than living out that great cultural narrative. Honestly, my parents have enough money now, I can do whatever I want.

I have seen, you know, I've enjoyed all that freedom. So suddenly, that story doesn't seem that attractive. Or let's look at the grand story of marriage.

[17 : 39] The grand story of love till death do us part. And more than ever, when things get difficult, people just get divorced, the narrative gets too complicated.

I just actually want to look at a story that gives me what I want right now. So if Lloyd-Tarr is correct, nowadays, we tend to pick stories based on how we feel in the moment, what works for us in the here and now.

We don't want to plow the ground and sow and weed and wait on rain. We prefer to eat what we want right now. So in his letter, James says that the coming of the Lord is near.

And he said these words almost 2,000 years ago. Now, I think when I use the word near, I use it in different terms. No wonder that people get impatient.

But then I have to admit that I have a hard time to evaluating time with an eternal perspective. So it may be my fault. It's like a mom or the moms you can probably relate to that.

[18 : 42] When you tell your kids you need to clean your room and they say yeah, I'll do it later. Or hey, supper is ready.

Come eat. Oh, I just need to finish that one level. And then one minute can turn into eternity and you wonder how long these levels are nowadays. And so I'm not surprised that the next part that follows says don't grumble against one another brothers and sisters or you will be judged.

The judge is standing at the door. So with your kids playing a game it's like you're getting frustrated with your kids and your kids are like mom, you don't understand I'm in the middle of the game and so it is with the church.

So we look around and we say ah, these are the people that are not running a community group like I do and they don't even tithe and you look around and we're starting to look at each other and what each other does wrong and what the text says is don't turn on each other especially when the pressure is up.

You may be right but how often do we all fall short of living out the story well so remember that the judge is standing at the door it's like I don't know whether you've been in this situation where you have talked about someone else and maybe a friend or a colleague in the office and just as you say all these things you see the boss right there and then you see how embarrassed you are and this is what James reminds us that our first responsibility is to how we live out the gospel in our lives how our actions look like how we are found faithful in living out a life that aims for holiness because one day God is standing at the door and he's not looking at what the others did wrong but it is our own responsibility on how we live our lives and so what follows in the text is an encouragement through examples of those who actually have patiently persevered so verses 10 and 11 say brothers and sisters as an example of patience in the face of suffering take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord as you know we count as blessed those who have persevered you have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about the Lord is full of compassion and mercy so first James gives the example of Job and there's a whole book in the Bible dedicated to Job's story in the Old Testament it tells of Job who despite extreme suffering losing his possessions losing his health losing his family he never considers really leaving God and so he stayed consistent with what he claimed he believed under pressure and in tough times the story he said he is telling to the world was also what he lived out and when you look at the text we can look into what the Lord finally brought about as something that relates to Job but it may also be something that is a second story that what the Lord finally brought about may be a reference to Jesus himself to himself staying true to the purpose that he endured suffering that he went to the cross and died that God himself shows his faithfulness and commitment to a story of redeeming his own creation so both the church and individuals have always struggled with it and if you look throughout history you see countless examples of this tension of on the one hand

[22 : 21] God's story and then how the world invites us into other stories that we are supposed to live for example you look in the early church and in the early church for hundreds of years we see countless examples of people that have been pressured to conform to what the authorities wanted leaving the gospel story behind and living the way that others lived but they would endure even to death and martyrdom in the 300s Constantine turned the Christian faith into a state religion and the temptation was just too great to say finally persecution can end maybe the new powers will influence the message but maybe it's worth it to gain that power finally to not being persecuted also during the Nazi regime the church largely in my country compromised to saying okay we will not say anything about the message of God's redemption we will not talk about the injustice that's happening as long as you don't hurt us and people got quiet and across the border many Christians are challenged by openly proclaiming their faith in God's story and maybe losing their job or worse one of the examples of all these people is a person I really like

Martin Niemöller and you may have heard me talk about him Niemöller was a pastor during that time in Nazi Germany and while most of the church stopped living out the gospel when under pressure compromising their message in their action Niemöller decided to stand up and he founded what he called the confessing church and he invited people in that said we will not compromise the gospel message one of his messages was God is my Führer and it was an open public statement and he preached in Berlin for 28 weeks knowing that one day they will get him and after 28 weeks of his sermon series he was put into a labor camp he survived six years of being in a labor camp but the really remarkable thing about him was not that but what he said after this time after the war was over when he was asked about this whole time and standing up for the gospel and why he wouldn't compromise this is what he says yes I could easily say that I have suffered for God and my faith for six years in a concentration camp but when I'm honest when I stand in front of God he will not say how proud he is for my sacrifice but he will ask me brother Martin where have you been from 1933 to 1939 when it all started and I would not have an answer later on he says if when it all started 40,000 German pastors would have stood up in one voice proclaiming that their message of the gospel is true and showing the action that justice and God's love are correct maybe 40,000 would have died but maybe 40,000,000 would have survived he's just one of these examples of people who have wrestled with living out

God's story out to the world and what about us what about us here today what do we choose as individuals as a church in Hong Kong as Watermark will we compromise our ethics in our workplaces when it may cost our jobs will our action be consistent with the story that we're telling will we give away freely our resources to people in need when we consider them the brothers and sisters and call them our family by name or will we abandon God's story when things get tough and to be honest I sometimes find these things hard to answer how I would choose I have friends that have been disowned by their families for their faith I have friends who had to leave their country and run away and can never go back if they don't want to get killed some were put in prison some were almost killed by their own families and as tough as that is

I'm encouraged by these examples of people around me that say this is a story I proclaim to be true how can I not live it out so the book of James ends with the following verses in verse 19 and 20 my brothers and sisters if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back remember this whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins so James finishes with a reminder that not everyone always perseveres and is patient to the end that sometimes people get discouraged and sidetracked and if we are honest that's true for all of us so many times the reality is like in that Christian hymn we are all prone to wander and leave the God we love the story of God is a story of God's creation and the fall and exile and recreation and we don't see that just in the big story of God creating everything and the fall of mankind and then his restoration through Christ and then the return to the coming kingdom we also see that in all these stories in Noah the people rebelling things being devastated the flood and then we see in that story the new beginning in a new land we see it in Christ's coming we see him coming to the world we see his suffering his death him being separated for three days from the father and in his resurrection everything is being redeemed and we see that all over our own lives we fall we feel abandoned and shattered we fail we are lonely but in the tough times we find a new dependence a new strength in God and that's when we come back renewed and throughout our lives there is a multitude of this cycle a multitude of us wandering away a multitude of our sin but James reminds us that what a blessing it is to help someone back on track so as we finish the sermon series on that book what do we do our challenges does James leave us for today here in Hong Kong so I want to actually look at these three core values that we have at Watermark and just revisit that and the first value that we always talk about is the gospel and we have this first banner because the gospel comes from that English old word meaning good news and the good news refers to that great story that we've been talking about that story of Christ redemption so in light of all what we have heard the question that arises is the one for us now is here where are we today in that story maybe you are here and you are visiting maybe you have been visiting a few times you may not be walking with Christ and say oh this is my story my storytelling is that Christian story then I encourage you to examine that claim maybe ask the friends that you have met here in your community groups if you are in one already or just anybody that sits around you and figure out where are they in the story that they tell but if you are here today and you are a Christian then the question is how are we doing in our story living are we like the people that come to the front to the big portrait coming to church on Sunday and we raise our hands and we worship and we say the things that we are supposed to say but when we go home when we are

in our families in our workplace in our own thoughts are our actions speaking another message are our is that message that in our heart we truly believe is it consistent with the story that we are telling to the others in the gospel we see Christ in his love and grace constantly calling us back so if you are here today and you are going through a rough time there is this as I was preparing this passage of Ezekiel 37 that just came to me and in Ezekiel 37 there is this this prophecy about the valley of dry bones and sometimes when you look around or you look at your own life and you see your life or people around you spiritually dried up like in that phrase that it says in verse 20 whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over multitudes of sin and that death is the death our real death but it is also that spiritual death and so that valley of dry bones reminded me of how God in his grace and his love he takes dry bones and he puts flesh on them and it is the living water that brings to life what is dead so if you are here today and you have been struggling with the journey of losing your track and feeling lost that you have been wondering where am I if I look at my action

[32 : 26] I am not living out that story that I say to everyone that I am a Christian then be encouraged that it is not just about your action but about Christ's action on the cross that he is the one that brings new life that he brings new hope and that he is the one that restores you and that leads me to our second banner to community if you are at that place it is not just you alone wrestling with the gospel but God has placed us in community that in our lostness that we are there to tell that story to each other to remind each other that Christ's story of restoration is still true today and to persevere till the Lord's coming so if you are here today and you think about where you are in the community maybe you realize am I really in my action following through in everything that I am called to do I live out that story do I love the people around me in the way that I am called to and that leads us to the third part our mission our third value is a mission that if we believe in the gospel to be true that if Christ died for us to reconcile us with God that he will come again and that in his story that there is eternal life if we really believe that if the story that we tell is true why would we not go and share that message both in our story living and our storytelling to the people around us

James leaves us with a lot of challenges and he leaves us with examining our hearts but ultimately you know where you are at and so I want to pray with us as we just take this challenge out into this week and into our own lives and just to see what God continues to do with his word in us let me pray Father we just come before you just realizing that sometimes the story that we confess may not be the story that we live in our everyday action and that we get sidetracked and discouraged and so Father let's pray that today we would just see that in your love and grace you call us back to you let's pray that we as a community would live that story well to each other remind us and tell the story to each other again and again Father let's pray for everyone here today that as they look into the story of their lives that they live out that it is one of the stories of the world that where they try to cling to meaning

I pray that you would just open the eyes of everyone here just make your story known show the truth of who you are and the power that is in your gospel message we pray all this in Christ's name Amen