The lectionary today begins a 5 week series on the letter of James so that is what we are going to be reading in worship during that time period. So each week over the next 5 weeks we are going to be reading from each of the 5 chapters of the book of James. I like preaching series on books of the Bible. I don’t care much for a lot of modern day preaching in which pastors pick and choose random texts of Scripture and throw them into a blender to fit an already decided upon message. I think that style of preaching makes the Bible a weapon to make a pre-determined point rather than allowing the Scriptures to agitate our established worldview. The Scriptures should agitate us. They should disturb us. Unnerve us.

The reformer Martin Luther did not think much of the book of James. Luther felt that James contradicted Paul’s writings elsewhere in the Bible and he felt that this was one book of the Bible that should be thrown out. As a result of Luther, the book of James has been pretty much ignored. But today we are going to spend a few weeks on this letter and, hopefully, catch a glimpse of what the Holy Spirit is up to then and today.

James is kind of a hard letter to read because it kind of jumps around. There is not a real good flow to it. And so, because of this randomness, anyone who tries to preach from this book has to make some decisions about what to focus on and what to ignore. That is happening today.

The book of James is traditionally attributed to James who was the half brother of Jesus and a leader in the early church. This letter is apparently written to believers who lived all around the known world.

I am going to read chapter 1 but I want to focus on the last few verses of this chapter. But as we read this chapter think about why James says what he says. In other words, James says what he says because the opposite must be happening in the churches that he is writing to.

**Read James 1.**

There is so much here in the first chapter of James that one could focus on and that is an important message for us. Persevere in the face of trials. Be humble and do not take pride in riches. Face down temptation. God is truth. Watch your tongue (or your tweets or your Facebook postings or your emails so that they don’t put others down.) Stay away from moral filth. Take care of the orphans and the widows in their distress. These are all messages that are found in just the first chapter of James. A five week series could easily be developed from just the first chapter.

But James also says in this first chapter to not merely listen to the word but to do what it says. Put your faith into action. Putting faith into action is a primary message in James so that is why I want to focus in on that part of James’ words.

Contrary to what lots of folks may say, it is actually pretty easy in our culture to be a Christian. Drive through downtown Clover or downtown York or downtown Rock Hill. Drive through the countryside of York County and what do you see all over the place. Lots and lots of churches. It is very easy to walk into a church and sit in a pew and be a quiet and contemplative Christian. But let me share with you a story about a place where being a Christian is a matter of life and death.

Dr. Timothy Smith tells the story about the summer he spent in Africa immediately following his college graduation. Smith was assigned to be an intern to Pastor Barry Lang, a Canadian missionary based in Liberia. Pastor Lang was pastorally responsible for a wide geographical area with dozens of tiny villages out in what they called "The Bush," which really meant isolated from development, electricity, or roads easily passable by vehicle. It was a rare and much-anticipated treat when once or twice a year the pastor came and celebrated with them the sacraments of baptism and communion.

On one of these long drives out to a tiny village, Pastor Lang shared that they might not be completely welcomed in the village. The descendants of village medicine men, he explained, felt that Christianity had usurped their rightful power and control over the villagers. So these so called medicine men would on occasion don hideous masks to scare and threaten the villagers.

"Bush Devils," as they were known, most commonly materialized when the people were gathering for Christian worship. On more than one occasion, Lang said, while he was leading a communion service in some remote village, the dreaded bush devil drums would begin to beat, and all the would-be worshipers would scoop up their children and flee to their huts. Several Christians, including a few missionaries during Lang's tenure who chose to defy the drumbeat warnings, had permanently vanished.

The pastor and his intern reached the village; and as they set up for communion in the mud and thatch church, sure enough, it happened...thump, thump, thump, thumpa thump. Faster. Louder. All of the villagers who had greeted the pastor and intern so warmly disappeared into their huts. What would they do if a bush devil, or several, appeared? Run? Hide? Fight!?

But then the sound of the drum was interrupted by a bell. Not a pretty bell, but a tinny clanging sound, and there was Pastor Lang, ringing the old church bell calling the people to worship. The louder and faster the drums beat, the more furiously he pulled the rope on that bell...a contest, it seemed...clang, clang! Thump thumpa thump! Until abruptly, Lang stopped ringing the bell.

And then there appeared from her hut an old stooped woman slowly shuffling her calloused bare feet toward the church in defiance of the threatening drums. Faces began to peep from the hut windows in horror and then in disbelief...and finally admiration. The old woman stopped at the church door, glanced back once more at the jungle toward the thump thumpa thump, and almost with a sneer, stepped into the church.

Lang resumed his ringing and then others followed, hesitantly and timidly at first, then boldly and defiantly! Women, then little naked children, and finally the men came streaming toward the church, and the drums fell silent. No bush devil appeared, as their greatest weapons of fear and intimidation had failed. And that little community of Christians with no lights, no organ, no stained glass, shared communion together. Thanks to that old woman who put her faith into action and her life on the line.

To my knowledge, we don’t have bush devils here in York County. But we do have a culture that says to be a Sunday morning Christian who sits in a pew and takes in a worship service and doesn’t agitate the waters around you. It is ok in our culture to be a Christian as long as you are meek and mild and go along with the powerful around you and use your Christianity to support the ones in power and not ruffle the status quo.

But let me share with you some real stories of Christians here in the United States who are putting their faith into action and agitating the ones around them. Pastor Martin Copenhaver tells about some of these agitating Christians who are members of the Congregational Church in his Massachusetts community.

He tells about the doctor who lives in an affluent suburb but her patients are all men, women, and children who live on the streets of Boston. One day she stood up in church and said, “I want to ask everyone in this church who has a second home to sell it and give the proceeds to help those who don’t have any home.”

In that church is a young personal financial advisor who has a wife and 3 children who got pressure from his supervisor to push certain financial products even though those products were not suitable for a lot of his customers. He decided to quit that company and take unemployment benefits.

In that church is an attorney who for 16 years defended someone on death row in another state on a pro bono bases. For most of those years this lawyer was the only contact his client had with the outside world. When his final appeal was denied, this lawyer flew across several states to walk past the cheering protestors and be present when his client was put to death.

In that church is a woman who lives in a neighborhood where her church sought to establish a home for adults with mental retardation. The whole neighborhood was up in arms. Property values, you know. She invited all her neighbors to her home for a reception and invited the young adults who would one day live in that home to pass the hors d’oeuvres.

In that church is the star high school lacrosse player who missed a week of practice during spring break because he went with his church to work on a mission project. He had to sit out two games due to missing practice. In front of his teammates he was berated by the coach for putting his own interests above the team and told that his selfishness cost the team two wins.

So how about you and me?

Are we the Christians who sit in a pew and fulfill our societal responsibility to be meek and mild? That is what is expected and rewarded in our culture.

Or are we called to be something different than that and to stir things up a bit by putting our faith into action? AMEN.

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# -Smith, Dr. Timothy, “Living Bread,” August 19, 2012, <http://day1.org/4042-living_bread>

# -Copenhaver, Martin, “Are You Talking to Me?” Journal for Preachers, Volume XXXV, Number 4, Pentecost 2012

# -Text: James 1

# -Given: September 2, 2012 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)