

## *The Blessing of Trials*

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*When it is dark enough, you can see the stars.* —Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ancient Witness: James 1:2-4

In the book, *Zorba the Greek*, there's a scene when Zorba's young companion asked him, "Zorba, have you ever been married?" to which Zorba replies, "Am I not a man? Of course I've been married—wife, house, kids... *the full catastrophe!*"

Jon Kabot-Zinn, renowned teacher of mindfulness meditation, says this isn't meant to be a lament, but more of an "appreciation for the richness of life and the inevitability of its sorrows, traumas, tragedies and ironies." "There is not one person on the planet," he says, "who does not have his or her own version of the full catastrophe."

In our lives we all experience: trials and temptations, failure, catastrophe, disaster, crisis, hardship and suffering. In Buddhism, the first of the Four Noble Truths is that "Life is suffering." The question is not *if* we suffer, we all experience it, but *what* we do with it. A spiritual mentor, Richard Rohr says that all great spirituality is what you do with your pain. He says, "If you don't transform your suffering, you'll transmit it."

And so my message this morning: A crisis is too good to waste. We are meant not merely to endure them or survive them. We are meant to be transformed and blessed by them. They are unique opportunities to grow spiritually, to awaken, to come alive.

The biblical writer, James, also had an appreciation of this. Now the first thing to remember to understand James' letter is that the early followers of Jesus were poor. Christianity began as a peasant movement. Jesus' message was the overturning of the social order that was very stratified, not by the power of violent revolution but by the power of the love of God.

And in this letter of James we find deep sympathies for the poor and an animosity toward the rich. The rich, in the eyes of James, are the enemies of Jesus and his followers. In fact, in Chapter 2 there is the stunning accusation that the church was becoming too rich! James rebukes them for being preoccupied with wealth and favoring the rich. James wrote:

*Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith? ...But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? (2:5-7)*

What we have here is James writing to a poor struggling congregation. If we read carefully we will discover that this congregation is facing hard times, persecution, sickness and poverty. And so James writes to them, "Brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy." Trials are a joy! They are a blessing! Now, to be clear, God does not "give us" trials. But he writes, "Blessed are those who endure temptation." These words are echoed

throughout the New Testament. For example, Jesus said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:10)

Now, this is in a stark contrast to the message that has been preached in many churches, a message that I can only call the “gospel of success.” According to that teaching, faith leads to wealth, happiness and good health. If your belief is strong enough and your thinking positive enough, then you will have prosperity.

Please hear me, I have no desire to romanticize failure or to demonize success. But what is keeping us from experiencing true joy is that we are using the wrong measuring stick. We fall into the trap of using the standards of our society, standards that are highly materialistic and not spiritual at all. Our tendency is to look at the wrong things.

Thomas Merton said that we spend our whole lives climbing the ladder of success only to find, once we reach the top, that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall.

James said, take your trials, take your failures, take your times when you are not successful and accept them joyfully. Endure them without grumbling or turning against each other. But we think, “This should not be happening to me! Take this cup from me!”

Over two decades ago, in his book, *The Politics of Meaning*, Rabbi Michael Lerner said that we are living in an ethos of selfishness and materialism:

*We live in a world in which more and more people find it difficult to recognize others as fundamentally deserving of our love and caring. Flooded by messages that tell us that caring for others is likely to be self-destructive, we find it increasingly difficult to give much attention to the needs of others, unless we can see how caring will be of advantage to use as well.*

This is perhaps more true now than 20 years ago. Lerner said that we are all split between our higher selves and our selfish selves. However, following our higher selves has become more difficult in our winner-take-all society. Lerner wrote:

*At this moment in American history, elites of wealth and power have managed to convince many middle-income Americans that they ought to identify with the interests of the wealthy and powerful instead of with those of the less fortunate.*

And so, what is good about trials and temptations? What is so good about falling flat on our face? It is this: *Trials can help us identify with the needs of the less fortunate.* Of course, this is what trials can teach us: empathy. They can teach us to see God in each other. So instead of separating ourselves from others, instead of averting our glance from the eyes of those who have fallen, we can follow our higher selves.

Throughout history, times of crisis have bound us together and have helped us care for each other. They give us permission to care. Lerner said that we think, “I don’t want to be the only fool on the block following my higher self.” But when there is a disaster, it becomes legitimate to help others. This is what trials can teach us, that we are connected to others. This is the blessing of trials.

Here's a story:

*Once upon a time, a young farmer lived in a village in Asia. He planted his very first crop of grain, and a few months later he harvested a crop which was enormous, beyond all expectations. So he bought a plot of land in the center of the village and built a cottage for himself.*

*Some of the villagers noticed and congratulated him on his success. The next spring he planted again, and at harvest time reaped abundantly. So he married a wife, and built another story on top of his cottage for her.*

*The villagers gathered around and congratulated him. They admired his expanded cottage, and some of them began to seek his advice. For surely someone so successful two years in a row must be very wise as well.*

*The next spring he planted his crop as the villagers watched. And in the fall, his harvest was enormous. By this time his wife had borne him a son. So he built another story on top of his cottage for his child. The villagers gathered around to admire the growing cottage. And many of them sought his advice.*

*The following spring he planted his crop again. And in the fall, his harvest was abundant again. His wife had born him a daughter, so he built another story on top of his cottage for her. And many of them sought his advice.*

*Since his harvest was abundant again the following year, he determined to build yet another story on top of his cottage. For he thought, "I must provide a place for the villagers to come and sit at my feet as they seek my advice."*

*So he began to build a fourth story on top of his cottage. But before it was finished, the original cottage collapsed under the accumulated weight. And the whole structure was turned into a pile of rubble.*

*The villagers came to see the rubble. And no one sought his advice.*

When I hear this story, I always think that it is ironic, because perhaps now the young man might actually begin to have something worth listening to, and the people are not interested. Because if our world needs to be healed—and it does—it will be done by “wounded healers.” It will be done by elders who have endured limitations, whose houses have fallen down.

As James writes, trials help us move on to “maturity” and “completeness.” (v. 1:4) This reminds me of the philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead’s definition of Youth: “Life untouched by tragedy.” Life touched by tragedy can have something unique and precious to offer. It can have a deeply mature and sensitive perspective and wisdom.

The ancient poet and playwright, Aeschylus, wrote:

*Even in our sleep,  
pain that cannot forget,  
falls drop by drop upon the heart,*

*and in our own despair,  
against our will,  
comes wisdom,  
through the awful grace of God.*

There is a kind of wisdom and spiritual awareness, that can only come through pain, despair and trials. *The greatest of all the spiritual teachers is suffering*, because true wisdom comes against our will. I hate that, but it's true.

Emerson said, "When it's dark enough, you can see the stars." *We need the darkness!* If I said, "Hey, let's go outside right now and look at the stars, you'd think that I've lost it." But they are there, shining like they always do. We need the darkness, the pain, the suffering, the failure in order to see something that is there all along, in order to become aware of a presence. We are connected to the Sacred Reality.

It was the mystic, Meister Eckhart who said, "God is not found through addition but through subtraction." God is not found by success and accumulation, by adding levels to our houses. Rather God is found when things are painfully stripped away—gradually taken away from us—like layers of an onion—to reveal a presence that has been there all along but didn't fully realize.

Perhaps human nature requires that we have to go over a cliff before we are truly willing to fall deeply into the presence of God. But this is the blessing that catastrophe and despair can offer.