

*sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on Sunday, 20 September 2009, the sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 20 in lectionary year B, based upon James 3:13-4:3, 7-8*

*There's nothing like driving across the country. Some of you have done this several times, I'm sure. I've done it twice, once to get to seminary in Berkeley, California, and once to move from there, to Brattleboro, Vermont.*

*On that first trip, in August of 1994, I intentionally built-in several extra days. I'd never been west of the Mississippi, and I wanted time to drive south into Denver, through the Rocky Mountains, and to have the ability to spend time in interesting places.*

*Along Interstate 70 in Colorado there is some of the most spectacular vistas of the Rocky Mountains. The kind of scenery that makes you want to stop the car, but I was from Michigan, where there are small hills not enormous mountains, and it was all I could do to get through the drive in one piece. Interstate Highway 70, from its highest elevation near Vail Pass down into the valleys on the western slopes, has a 7% grade. The maximum grade for most interstate highways is 6%, and the optimal grade is 4%.*

*But the terrain was simply too severe to achieve those benchmarks, so a federal waiver permitting the 7% grade was signed by President Ford. 7% is really, really steep. I was convinced that the guardrails were placed randomly—maybe to instill a bit of confidence after looking over the shoulder into an abyss of 1000 feet.*

*Something happened on that long descent. I was about a quarter way down when I came to a check point—a little booth like those you find in parks everywhere. I slowed to a stop, and a woman held a measuring device to the front wheel of my Plymouth Duster, and then came over to talk with me.*

*"The temperature of your brakes is 325°. We don't recommend anyone going ahead with a reading of over 300°. It's up to you, but we recommend you pull over and let your brakes cool down for 15 or 20 minutes. When brakes overheat they sometimes fail."*

*It never occurred to me to question her authority or her wisdom. I had no inclination to say, "Well, how often do brakes really fail? I think I'll just take my chances. Thanks anyway for your advice." This is usually what we do, isn't it? Question authority, fuss about why big brother or big sister is telling us what to do.*

*But not halfway down the Rocky Mountains. Besides, I needed the time out just to unclench my hands from the steering wheel and let the blood return to my knuckles. More importantly, the quiet authority of the officer was reassuring. I needed guidance and I knew it. And I took it gladly.*

*We need guidance for the whole of our lives, but where do we look for it? Where is it found?*

*For the past four weeks, and with one more Sunday to go, we've been hearing excerpts from the letter of James. It's been a tonic of sorts this summer, amidst budget deadlocks, dizzying economic forecasts, and the shrill cries of ridicule filling our airways and spilling even from our own lips. Regardless of the times or the situations in our world or own homes, most of us would say that we need someone to take our hand and lead us.*

*Our guide is James, the brother of Jesus. What do we know about James? We can look to one of the Gospels where we find Jesus returning to his hometown of Nazareth and inspiring the people there with his spiritual insight and his power to make people whole.*

*The common reaction was:*

*Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?*

*There are other references to James. In the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1 Corinthians Paul summarizes the faith of the early church by listing those who came to believe in Christ after that first Easter. Paul tells of the persons to whom Jesus appeared including Peter and then the twelve apostles. He goes on to say that Jesus appeared to more than five hundred others and "then he appeared to James...."*

*James would go on to become the leader of the young church in Jerusalem. When church leaders gathered to decide what Jewish laws and customs would be required of non-Jewish converts to Christianity, James came down strongly in favor of including Gentile believers based on their faith in the Risen Christ and not on their following the letter of the law on customs like circumcision.*

*James was the spiritual leader of the Mother Church in Jerusalem. But unlike Paul, we don't have much else to go on regarding his role in the early days of Christianity.*

*What we do have is his letter of five chapters, a writing that gets short shrift in most quarters.*

*Today's installment focuses on the pursuit of wisdom, and continues the thread of lauding our good works and our continual seeking for God. Wisdom, for James, is like love. Today we hear "God draws near to us and we draw near to God." When does God draw near to you? At a beautiful sunrise on Plum Island? When does God draw near? In the glorious sound of trumpet and organ on your first Sunday in a new church? In the bread given and the wine poured? When you hold your grandchild in your arms? At the start of another season of Church School? In each of them, and in so many other moments, even when we don't perceive God's presence, the Holy One draws near.*

*I don't know you enough to guess what you're looking for when you come through these doors. But if you're anything like I am, it changes. The desire we have for holiness, or for community, or for wisdom...those desires are in proportion to what's happening in our lives. But let's not confuse the changes in what we seek with God's proximity and presence. God is always near. Next Sunday is our final episode of James. Hear what you hear and see what you see; listen and look for James's unwavering conviction that God is good.*

*James grew up with Jesus, and he experienced his resurrected presence. You might say that James has authority like unto the woman who measured the temperature of my brakes coming down that mountain highway. And the Church, at our best, is like a little checkpoint to rest and to listen; a place to give and to receive; a stopping point for the sharing of wisdom.*

*Join me in taking James's advice as we seek after and find Wisdom on the road of life.*

*The Reverend Thomas James Brown*

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