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TALES OF THE MARINE LAYER

James 4:13-17

Do you ever suffer from VPD, Volitional Paralysis Disorder? In other words, you have a hard time exercising your will to make decisions? That happens to me way too often. I have a tendency to get overwhelmed and choke. I love doughnuts. I don’t eat them often, but I do love them. I hate it when on the occasion that we decide to get some doughnuts that we go into our favorite doughnut shop and find the shelves almost empty. It’s so disappointing to look forward to some yummy treats, only to find that there’s hardly anything on the shelves, and none of them are your favorite kinds.

However, I occasionally have a problem at the opposite end of the spectrum. This is where VPD can crop up. I walk into the shop and find that the shelves are filled with a wide variety of delicious doughnuts. There are so many to choose from that I can’t decide what to buy. Like I said, I have a tendency to get overwhelmed and choke, defaulting to a couple of my favorites. I go away at least happy with the favorites, of course, but also with a vague sense that maybe I missed an opportunity to get something different that I would love to eat.

I bring this up because VPD could potentially come into play as we begin a new year. On this first day of 2023 the shelves of this year are packed with possibility. The question we face is, how can we make the most of this new year? It’s a new start. What can we do to make sure we maximize this year? Let’s think about how we can make the most of this year. For wisdom on this we’re going to look at James 4:13-17.

WHAT WE DON’T KNOW CAN HURT US

James depicts a person who confidently proclaims, “I will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money,” as though all of that is within his control. That’s hubris, a form of pride, and he has just said God is opposed to the proud. But isn’t this also kind of a general description of someone making a business plan? Is it bad to make plans?

That can’t be right. We don’t do anything without making a plan of some sort. In order to accomplish anything we have to start with some idea of what we’re going to try to do and how we’re going to do it. We are having a worship service today. That started with us saying, “We are going to have a worship service on Sunday, so we need to set up a place to meet. We need to choose some songs to sing, we need to have someone speak and he needs to plan what he’s going to say.” If we didn’t do those things we could never meet. So there is something else that James must be talking about here.

In verse 14 James tells us why making plans can be hard, “You do not even know what will happen tomorrow.” He’s exactly right. Our knowledge extends zero seconds into the future. We can make all the plans we want, but because we have no idea what is going to happen beyond this present moment, we have zero guarantee that our plans will come anywhere close to happening. Things can change so dramatically that they blow all our plans into atoms.

We don’t know what is going to happen next. Two weeks ago I mentioned our grandson Wesley’s favorite toy. It is a toy penguin that he calls Pengey. It has an annoying feature. It has a recorder in it, and it repeats everything you say and every sound you make. I pointed out that it is sound activated, that it can only play back the sounds it records. It has no ability to speak on its own. I said if Pengey began to speak on his own it would be shocking, because that would take a miracle. The very next day Laurie and I were with Wesley when Pengey suddenly began speaking on his own! He started speaking in Spanish when no one was saying anything to him, then he started singing in Spanish! I was dumbfounded. I was witnessing what seemed impossible. Carissa solved the puzzle for us. She told us this had happened a couple of times before. Somehow the electronics in Pengey occasionally pick up the radio signal from a Spanish language radio station, and when he gets that signal he begins repeating what he hears and records. You never know what is going to happen next.

We got a dose of the effect of that uncertainty last week. We had a plan to get together with all our kids and grandkids on Christmas day for dinner. The day before Christmas we learned that Michael, our son in law, had covid. And our granddaughter Ella got a stomach virus. The Christmas day event was canceled. Late that afternoon we had our Christmas Eve service. While we were rehearsing for the service the heel of Laurie’s shoe broke. She had to duct tape it on and walk very carefully to get through the service. Stuff happens that we just couldn’t anticipate.

James is reminding us of the reality of life. Because we don’t know what is going to happen even moments in the future, we must always be humble and hold our plans loosely. Yes, make your plans, because you must, but always with the attitude that you are not in control of what happens in the end. When we don’t know what is going to happen but make decisions and plans, it can blow up in our faces because things occur that we never saw coming.

Five years ago Laurie and I went to the wedding of a niece in Iowa. As we planned our trip we looked at some motels in the small town where the wedding would take place and were shocked. The prices seemed outrageous. We had been offered a place to stay in an old home in a town not too far away. It was free, so even though we kind of preferred the motel option, we chose to save hundreds of dollars by taking the free place. That resulted in our encounter with a bat in our bedroom in the middle of the night, and that led to us having to get rabies shots. That cost us a couple of thousand dollars. Had we known what was going to happen we’d have made a very different choice.

For all that, our experience was infinitely better than what happened to another person who had a similar encounter with a bat back in that region. He did not have a doctor son who told him that he absolutely had to get rabies shots even though he didn’t think he had been bitten by the bat. He listened to the many locals who said if he wasn’t bitten he didn’t need to concern himself. As Toby told us, the problem is you can be bitten by a bat and not know it. That man got rabies, which is 100% fatal. It cost him his life. Had he only known.

WE HAVE A MISTY LIFE

James next tells us, “You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. In other words, we are like the marine layer. One of the most common weather conditions we experience in Coastal San Diego County is the marine layer we wake up to many mornings. If you didn’t know better you’d think when you got up that you’re in for a cloudy day all day. But that marine layer is just a mist, a vapor. As the sun warms the day up it begins to dissipate in the morning hours. It is common for it to be a bright sunny day by 10 AM or so. James says that vapor is pretty much like us.

The marine layer picture says 2 things to us. First is that our lives are temporary and don’t last very long. Just like the marine layer is not permanent and disappears rather quickly, so our lives are not permanent and are all too brief. In Psalm 39:5 David wrote, “You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of years is as nothing before you. Everyone is but a breath, even those who seem secure.” Psalm 102:11 says, “My days are like the evening shadow; I wither away like grass.” It is always a bit sad to me when I drive around here in the spring, and after the winter and spring rains the hills are all beautiful and green. The sad part is I know that when we get into the summer months that green is going to disappear. The grass dies and the hills turn brown. The Psalm says that’s like us. We’re like that grass. We will fade away and die out way too soon.

I hate that message. I’m old. According to average life expectancy in our country, I’m late in the fourth quarter, very near the end of the game. In fact, I’m getting close to the 2 minute warning. It has gone by way too fast. What’s really frustrating is that I can’t stop the clock.

So our lives are appallingly brief. But the other aspect of this marine layer life of ours that is disconcerting is how tenuous it is. A marine layer is insubstantial, and it doesn’t take much to cause it to dissipate. Once again this is all too true of us as well. When our son was in medical school, the first year they studied the systems of human body, and he marveled at its wonders. The second year they studied diseases, all the things that can go wrong with our systems. He told me after that he was amazed that any of us survive. So much can happen to us that can snuff our lives out in short order.

Think about the weird things that can happen to people to give you a sense of fragile nature of our existence. The London Telegraph carried a story of a man in Brazil who died in bed. He died when a cow fell on him. His house was built into a hill, and the cow had managed to get up on the roof of the house. It fell through the roof and landed on the man who suffered internal bleeding from his injuries. The cow was fine.

My point here is we are fragile creatures, surrounded by threats that could snuff our life out in an instant. Yeah, um, Rick, this is all bad news. How is this helping us make the most of life? All you’ve done so far is freak us out and depress us. It may seem depressing to think like this, but it is always better to see reality than live with an illusion. If we go through life thinking we control things that we, in fact, do not, if we think we’re awfully important and we’re going to live forever, all we do is set ourselves up for frustration, anxiety, fear and disappointment. A much better way to deal with life is to say it is what it is and ask if there is some way to have peace, hope and joy in the face of it. And there is.

GOD’S WILL IS THE GLUE

In verse 15 James said, “You ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’” Some people then figure this means they plan and talk as always, but just tack on, “if the Lord wills” and think they’ve done what James was discussing. But he means much more than just adding a phrase onto our plans.

Verse 16 ends with some curious words. “All such boasting is evil.” Evil is an awfully strong word, don’t you think? It’s not at all what I expected. I figured in light of our brief and tenuous lives, in light of our lack of knowledge of the future, James would have said that boasting about our plans is foolish. Foolish certainly is not good, but it is in a different quantum orbit from evil. We don’t want to be foolish, for sure. But evil is a different ball game altogether. Why would James say the kind of boasting he is talking about is evil? What’s so bad about it?

James was talking about a mindset, one that does not have God at the center of all things. What matters is what people do, what I decide and choose to do, and God is irrelevant. I control what happens. I’m the captain of my ship, the master of my fate. What God wants to happen doesn’t matter, what I want is what matters. This is a way of thinking that first appeared in the Garden of Eden. It is evil because it is the root of all the suffering that has happened throughout human history. It is evil because whenever we operate by that thinking we cause suffering for others and even for ourselves.

Colossians 1:16 says of Christ, “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.” Pay attention to those words. Everything was created for him. Why does the universe exist? It is for him, to serve his purposes. Why does the earth exist? It is for him, to serve his purposes. Why does the human race exist? It is for him, to serve his purposes. Why do I exist? I exist for him, and for no other reason. I am here to serve his purposes. What James was warning about is forgetting that, and thinking we are for ourselves, here to serve our own purposes and desires. That thinking always leads to evil.

I was watching a football game. I know, you’re shocked. This was an NFL game and Tony Romo was the analyst. He was a very good quarterback when he played in the NFL, but I think he’s the best analyst in the business. In this game at a crucial juncture the quarterback of one of the teams threw an interception. It looked like an awful throw because it went right to a defender. What was the quarterback looking at? Why make that throw? It seemed like a horrible decision. Romo quickly said that the interception wasn’t the quarterback’s fault. I thought he was just trying to protect a fellow quarterback, but then he broke down the replay of the incident. He explained the route the receiver was supposed to run. Then he showed how the receiver decided to do his own thing. He apparently didn’t think he could get open running the route as it was designed, so he went a different direction. The quarterback threw the ball exactly where it was supposed to go on time, only the receiver wasn’t there to catch it, so it sailed beyond where the receiver would have been right to a defender. The problem was the receiver decided, “I will do what I think is best.” He operated according to his own thoughts and purposes, and ended up acting at cross purposes with the coach who designed the play and the quarterback who was executing it. The result was football evil.

When we operate out of the mindset James was referring to, we are operating at cross-purposes with Almighty, Holy God. The result will inevitably be evil. It most certainly will not end up making the most of the life we have. It will be the exact opposite. The way to make the most of life is to put God in the center and operate according to his purposes, to remember at all times, “I am made for him, not for me.” That is not our natural bent, and it certainly is not what the overwhelming majority of people are doing. But it is the only way we can maximize life.

IMPLICATIONS

So what can we do to make sure in 2023 we make the most of the year?

LIVE TODAY

Our lives are short and uncertain. We have no guarantee of even another day. The only day we can be certain of is today. So live with your focus on today and do it with all your might. In Matthew 6:34 Jesus said, “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough troubles of its own.”

Isn’t that the truth? Today I have all I need on my plate. So what sense does it make to borrow from tomorrow, or next week, or next month or 10 years from now and put it on my plate today? It makes no sense at all, it just makes today so very much harder than it needs to be.

I just had my second attempt at immune therapy 4 days ago. As you know, the first treatment was only slightly more successful than the Titanic’s attempt to cross the Atlantic. So that has introduced a considerable amount of trepidation into this experience. What if it happens again? What if I can’t tolerate this treatment? There’s a lot of bad that could happen. If I choose to camp out on those things it introduces a deluge of fear, anxiety, sadness. I can do that, or I can say, “Well, I’m alive today. I have no control whatsoever over those things so fretting about it won’t help. What I can do is make the most of this day and put the rest of it in God’s hands.” What that does is make this day more precious. It is the one day I know I have. And that is true for every single one of us every day.

To make the most of this year recognize that yes, life is short and uncertain and out of our control, so we need to be wherever we are and make the best of this moment, this situation, this day. We need to give everything we have to whatever God gives us to do today.

KNOW THAT GOD IS FLYING THE PLANE

I have mentioned before that one of the more tense moments Laurie and I have ever had on an airplane happened a few years ago when seconds before landing at Maui the pilots aborted. I expected we would go around and land on a second attempt, but we didn’t. It quickly became apparent that we were heading toward Honolulu where there is a longer runway and more emergency services. In other words, it was clear there was something wrong with the airplane that made landing problematic. It was not a happy moment. Since then I have reflected on that moment and asked myself, “How would I have felt in those moments if our son in law Michael had been flying the plane?” I guarantee you that I would have been much more at ease than I was. I have total confidence in Michael. He was number 1 in his flight school class when he was a Marine, number 1 in his jet training, and he was the best pilot in his squadron flying F-18 fighter jets. He has had incidents where he had engines flame out on take off and was able to safely land his aircraft. If Michael were in the cockpit I would know that he is ready to handle whatever comes and that he would get that plane safely onto the ground.

Psalm 16:4 says, “The Lord works out everything to its proper end, even the wicked for a day of disaster.” Proverbs 16:33 says, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.” God even has control over the roll of the dice or the flip of the coin at the beginning of a football game! Ephesians 1:11-12 says, “In him (Christ) we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.” Everything is being worked out by God. He’s flying the plane.

This is why Jesus can tell us to not worry about tomorrow. God will still be flying the plane tomorrow just like he is today. This is why we can be at peace and focus on being 100% present and engaged wherever we are today. We keep trying to run up to the cockpit and wrestle the controls away from God, even though we have no idea how to fly the plane, or ability to do so even if we did. All that does is increase stress and anxiety. When we let God fly the plane we can be at peace and relax.

DON’T BE EVIL

By that I mean don’t put yourself and your desires at the center of life. Instead put God there. Make him Lord of your life. Live to do his will in every situation. Seek more than anything to bring glory to him in all that you do and say. If we don’t put God in that central, controlling position, we will put ourselves there, and the result will be in ways we may not even perceive we will start doing evil.

How will that help us make the most of our days in 2023? We will be fulfilling our purpose, the reason for our existence. Laurie has been on an interesting roll lately. Last year we decided we needed to change out a large mirror we had in our bedroom. We got a new one, and we put the old one in the garage. Recently we also decided we needed to change a large mirror in our living room because the old one was not in good shape and was looking quite dated. So we put the old one in the garage. Laurie bought a new one on line. When it came it was damaged. It was cheaply made, and it looked terrible. Laurie contacted the company she bought it from about how to return it and get our money back. They said, “Just keep the mirror and we will refund your money.” So that huge mirror is also now in our garage. Laurie bought another mirror. This second mirror came and it looked nice, but it was also damaged and had some mold on the back. Laurie contacted the company about returning it and they said, “Keep the mirror and we’ll refund your money.” That mirror went out into the garage. Laurie bought yet another mirror and when it came it looked terrible in the space in the living room. She contacted the company about returning it and getting a refund. They said, “Keep the mirror and we’ll refund your money.” So that one went out into the garage.

Do you see a theme here? Our garage has become a mirror storage depot. The mirrors are taking over. It is annoying. That’s not what our garage is supposed to be about. That certainly is not my purpose for it, and so now instead of fulfilling my purpose my garage is an irritation. It irks me every time I go out there. What does that have to do with anything, you might ask. Stuff is going to fill your life. It’s going to fill your year. If you are not filling it with God’s purposes, you are building up a pile of stuff that is just irritating. In the end your life will mean nothing, because you haven’t fulfilled your reason for existing. You will become irksome, and you’ll sense it.

Eminent Ivy League sociologist, Philip Rieff, wrote in his book, *The Crisis Of The Officer Class*, “We simply cannot live as if life were meaningless, without purpose.” He said humans cannot bear that, it rips apart our souls. If we do not line up with God’s purpose, in the end everything else we do will be meaningless and annoying. But if we live for God’s purpose, it infuses every moment of life with meaning. Everything we do can be directed at his will and his glory and that is the point of us and everything else in life.

If we seek the Lord we will make better moral choices. When we make bad choices, self driven choices, at some point we will regret them. Due to Covid Michael and Carissa put off opening presents until yesterday. Wesley is only 3 so they kept telling him it wasn’t Christmas yet. Yesterday we and Michael’s parents got to join them for the joyful celebration opening gifts. Wesley really got into opening presents. He made quite a haul. But at one point he decided he wanted to watch Mickey Roadster Racers on TV. His parents said no. He had a nuclear meltdown. His parents told him he didn’t need to watch TV because it was Christmas. He wailed, “I hate Christmas!” There’s something no kid ever said. He loves Christmas and has been eagerly anticipating it for weeks. He’s probably watched Mickey Saves Christmas 50 times. But when you put self at the center you do evil. He made himself unhappy and didn’t exactly bless everyone around him.

We just heard about the dad of some young friends, a man his adult children all admired, a supposedly godly man, who has just blown up his marriage with an extended affair. He has devastated his wife and his children, shattered the family and filled his own life with guilt and regret. It could all have been avoided by not choosing to put himself as the center of life.

Having God at the center will also impact the quality of our lives. It means we will leave each moment with hope. It means that there will be wonder, for God is present in our world. We can live each day asking, “What are you going to do today, Lord, and what do you want me to do?” It will fill us with expectation and possibility. Francois Fenelon says, “Accept what God chooses for you. This is more important than what you choose for yourself.” He went on to say when we start looking for him, we will see God everywhere.

Finally, as we have seen, there will be peace, for we can trust God in all that he is doing in our world. There will be joy because he is with us and because we have hope. This is what will make 2023 full, when you seek God and his will above all else in everything you do.