

At the Crossroads: 5. My Story
Acts 20:15-20; James 1:5
September 19, 2021
Pastor Steve Richards

Every August when I was a child, our parents would load up the station wagon, connect the pop-up trailer, and we'd leave town on a four-week camping adventure. Some years, we went west to California or East to Washington DC, north into Canada, and every other year to Dallas, Texas because that's where our parents met and were married. My Dad would do most of the driving and mom would be the navigator until I was old enough and was promoted to the front seat where I gave Dad the directions by reading the map. Do some of you remember maps? For the younger people who are listening, maps were these large sheets of paper that showed cities and towns and the highways that could get you there. I remember a few times when I was doing the navigating but fell asleep – in fact, everyone fell asleep, and dad kept driving. When I woke up, he had driven a hundred miles or more beyond the exit we were supposed to take. Maybe you've heard the expression: If you don't know where you are going any way will do. I think my dad was living proof of that. But if you know your destination, then you need to know how to get there.

And that's something I've learned from the New Testament book of James. When we stand at the crossroads of life, let's put that faith to work. Since this is our fifth and final week in this series from the book of James, let's recap where we are. James was the brother of Jesus, writing to Jews who had become Christians. They believed that Jesus had been raised and that belief had changed their lives, but it had not changed the world around them. How to merge or apply one's faith to the challenges of life. So, we looked at 4 themes: 1. **Consider it joy when you face trials of many kinds...** Faith does not keep us from the trials and challenges of life, but consider it joy when you have faith to bring you through those trials. 2. **Everyone is tempted by their own cravings.** God will not eliminate your cravings and desires, but faith will empower you to stand up to the temptations. 3. **Faith is dead when it doesn't result in faithful activity.** When you see human need, you must not turn away, because coming face-to-face with human need is an opportunity to put your faith to work. When you come to the intersection of pride and humility, you will be tempted to choose pride, but it must be counter balanced with humility. 4. **Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.**

We face crossroads – when we have a choice to make, and the choice isn't always clear. It's easy when there's a green light and we don't even slow down. We know where we are going and how to get there. But there are times when it isn't clear or we have competing interests – this way would be good for me, but this way would be good for my kids, and this way might be best for all of us. Or our desires, some inner desire that wants to be satisfied but is that what God wants for me. Maybe you are standing at a crossroads right now and you look around and the destination is clear but not how to get there.

Here's what James says: **Anyone who needs wisdom should ask God, whose very nature is to give to everyone without a second thought, without keeping score. Wisdom will certainly be given to those who ask.**

We are given an example of this in today's scripture from the book of Acts. The full title of this book is Acts of the Apostles, but if you read the book, you will discover that it is actually the Acts of the Holy Spirit. After more than a dozen years and three missionary journeys, stretching from Jerusalem to Athens, Paul is now at a crossroads. Should he go back to Ephesus or skip Ephesus and go to Jerusalem. Neither option would be easy. He had spent more time in

Ephesus than any other place in his travels, but Paul had faced constant resistance and persecution in Ephesus because a life of faith was often in conflict with the way other people were living. But the church in Ephesus wanted Paul to return. They needed Paul who never backed away from faith when facing opposition. It wouldn't be easy, but going to Ephesus – he could make a case for that. Or maybe it was time to go to Jerusalem. In his most recent journey, he had collected an offering for the church in Jerusalem that was experiencing persecution. The believers were suffering – physically hungry. But he might be killed if he returned to Jerusalem. Remember, he was the Jew who led the effort to stamp out the Christians and then he suddenly became a champion for those he had tried to kill. He had betrayed the Jews, and there was a price on his head. Ephesus or Jerusalem? He's at a crossroads. How does he decide? Paul says, **Compelled by the Spirit, I'm going to Jerusalem. I don't know what will happen to me there.**

Have you ever stood at a crossroads and felt compelled to go one way and to know it's the Holy Spirit who is leading? I've been at the crossroads with options. None of the options were wrong. My head would take me one direction. My heart another. Which way?

There's a scene that comes to mind from *Castaway*, one of my favorite movies with Tom Hanks. He plays the role of Chuck Noland a troubleshooter for FedEx. One Christmas Eve, he is called in to service to fix something in Malaysia. The cargo plane he gets on is caught in a severe storm and crashes into the Pacific. He's the only one to survive and ends up marooned on a deserted island. For most of the movie, we see his desperate attempts to survive and return home. For four years he's alone, his only companion a volleyball named Wilson. When materials wash up on the beach that enable him to build a raft, he takes the risk, leaves the island, and is eventually picked up by a passing ship. He returns to a world that has moved on. Everyone thought he was dead. There was a funeral, an empty casket was buried, his fiancé has remarried and has a child. He's greeted by his employer as if he's a hero, but he's lost. He can't stay where he is. He's got to move forward, but where? Here's the final scene from the movie. [movie clip]

Which way? Could the woman in the truck be a sign that he should follow her? Or take the road to Amarillo and onto California or the road north to Canada? Which way? Which way to meaning and purpose and if the Holy Spirit is doing the compelling – which way? The movie ends without an answer and we are left to wonder. It's a scene that resonates with me, because the choice isn't always clear. For some time, I've been at that crossroads. If I didn't think I was, the mail over the past year kept reminding me this is a milestone year. Every insurance company wants to help me sign up for Medicare. It feels like every financial planner wants to help me sign up for Social Security. Surely, I can't be old enough – I can't already be where I am!

I had this idea that I'd work until I was 70 because I love what I do and can't imagine not doing it so 70 seems far enough away that I wouldn't have to make a decision. But then 5 years ago, Amanda was diagnosed with cancer which hit us both like a ton of bricks. And I thought about I've never met anyone at the end of life who said I wish I would have worked more. So, I took advantage of a program for clergy that was intended to help me discern the next 7 years of my life – that was three years ago. As part of that discernment, I spent a week in a silent retreat at a monastery in New Mexico – all alone – no devices, no human voices – all alone with my thoughts. And I think I felt what Paul experienced – compelled by the Holy Spirit. I wrote a manifesto, a statement of what I value and my purpose in this life. Let me read two sentences from that manifesto: *My life purpose is to use all that I am and all that I have to fill lives with the power of God's love. I will act with courage to push back the darkness in this world and work to*

create space where light can guide and grow the next generation. The next generation. Those words are compelling to me. This was before I knew I would have a grandson in my life.

I'm at this crossroads. I can't deny the constant forward motion of the calendar. I love where I am, but I feel compelled – that God is leading me into a new chapter in life. The world calls it retirement, but I'm not ready to use that word. I haven't found a biblical imperative for retirement, but it's time to take another road. So, after more than 21 years as your pastor and more than 41 years in ordained ministry, it's time to take another road. I will be retiring on my 66th birthday which will be July 1, 2022.

It has been a privilege beyond anything I could have imagined to serve as your pastor all these years. Some days it feels like a blink of the eye and the years have come and gone – until I look in the mirror or I see a photo from 21 years ago. Nine months ago, I informed our Servant Steering Team of my plan to leave, and they have been at work to understand the culture of this church and the process and dynamics of a pastoral transition. In the United Methodist Church, clergy are appointed by the bishop in consultation with the local church and the Servant Steering Team serves as your representatives in that process. Here's who serve on that team [photo]. They are a gifted group, each one committed to Christ and to this church and ready to work toward the best possible leadership for this church. By tomorrow, there will be a page on our website called Pastor Transition, where you will find updates as they become available. [camera] A letter has been mailed to our members that should arrive on Monday or Tuesday. There will also be a townhall meeting after worship on October 3 where you can meet our Servant Steering Team, hear about the process to find the next pastor. The appointment process is designed so that there will not be a gap between pastors. The week after my final Sunday with you another pastor will be in place.

What have we learned about the crossroads of life? We all will stand at the crossroads, and we need faith in a God who is with us and will walk with us – even when the way is uncertain. And that God will love us.

Again, I turn to James: **Anyone who needs wisdom should ask God, whose very nature is to give to everyone without a second thought, without keeping score. Wisdom will certainly be given to those who ask.** What I've shared with you today, puts us at a crossroads. My prayer for us in these next nine months together is that will be filled with the presence and the power of God's Spirit – if we are patient enough and listen, the Spirit will compel us onward.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of September 19, 2021

Weekly Prayer: When we do not know which way to turn, O God, give us the wisdom to turn to you. We come to this time of worship with hearts that feel the weight of needs unmet and a future not certain. Open our hearts to the power of your Spirit as we listen for your voice. Let us breathe in deeply of your forgiving love, and, with renewed faith in you, guide us to wholeness through the one who makes all things and all people new, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Monday, September 20

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Look here! Today I've set before you life and what's good versus death and what's wrong. If you obey the LORD your God's commandments that I'm commanding you right now by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments, his regulations,

and his case laws, then you will live and thrive, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you refuse to listen, and so are misled, worshipping other gods and serving them, I'm telling you right now that you will definitely die. You will not prolong your life on the fertile land that you are crossing the Jordan River to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth as my witnesses against you right now: I have set life and death, blessing and curse before you. Now choose life—so that you and your descendants will live—by loving the LORD your God, by obeying his voice, and by clinging to him. That's how you will survive and live long on the fertile land the LORD swore to give to your ancestors: to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Observation: After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, Moses brought the Israelites to a crossroads. They had been through a long and arduous journey from slavery to freedom, but they had reached the point where the Promised Land was before them. The road ahead would not be easy, which was why they also faced another kind of crossroads. Moses was aware that his own death was approaching. Who and what would lead them forward? They had a choice. Would they choose life or death?

Application: You frequently stand at a crossroads. It may not be as consequential as the one that Moses presented to the Israelites. But then again, we often do not know how consequential a decision would be at the moment we needed to make it. Think back to one of your life decisions and the impact that decision has had on your life. Did you choose wisely? What will guide you when you stand at the crossroads? Here's what Moses commanded: by loving the LORD your God, by obeying his voice, and by clinging to him."

Prayer: Thank you, God, that you stand with us at the crossroads of life and provide a way for us through the intersections. May I be humble enough to listen and ready enough to follow each day. Amen.

Tuesday, September 21

Scripture: Acts 9:1-9

Meanwhile, Saul was still spewing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest, seeking letters to the synagogues in Damascus. If he found persons who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, these letters would authorize him to take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. During the journey, as he approached Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven encircled him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice asking him, "Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me?" Saul asked, "Who are you, Lord?" "I am Jesus, whom you are harassing," came the reply. "Now get up and enter the city. You will be told what you must do." Those traveling with him stood there speechless; they heard the voice but saw no one. After they picked Saul up from the ground, he opened his eyes but he couldn't see. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind and neither ate nor drank anything.

Observation: This is one of the most dramatic crossroad experiences in scripture. Saul (who would later be named Paul) who was hostile to the early Christians, is confronted by the risen Jesus; three days later he becomes a disciple, and begins preaching the good news about Jesus. What makes this dramatic is that Saul did not know he was standing at a crossroads. All indications were that he was content with his life and his mission to terrorize Christians. Yet, God chose the Damascus Road as Saul's crossroad moment, and Saul would choose wisely.

Application: You are not likely to be struck down, blinded, and called out by the risen Jesus. But have you experienced a time when you knew you could not continue in a direction you were

living? Saul's change in direction was such that people who knew him could not believe he had changed. But God never failed to give Saul/Paul the strength to continue in the path that God placed before him. How can you maintain your connection with God so that you are strengthened?

Prayer: God, as you were present with and provided strength to Paul, so strength me in all that I face. Let me be a witness to your unfailing presence in my life. Amen.

Wednesday, September 22

Scripture: Acts 16:6-10

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the regions of Phrygia and Galatia because the Holy Spirit kept them from speaking the word in the province of Asia. When they approached the province of Mysia, they tried to enter the province of Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus wouldn't let them. Passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas instead. A vision of a man from Macedonia came to Paul during the night. He stood urging Paul, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" Immediately after he saw the vision, we prepared to leave for the province of Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

Observation: Paul had a plan, but God had another plan for Paul. If Paul had pursued his original plan, surely he would have spread the message of the risen Jesus into Asia. But God would send Paul ever closer to the power center of the Roman Empire. Paul would ultimately be martyred in Rome, but 2000 years later, Rome is filled with Christian cathedrals and all that remains of the Roman Empire is ruins. Paul arrived at a crossroads, and he took the direction that God placed before him.

Application: Paul had a plan, but God had another plan for Paul. When have you felt God was close to you, nudging you in a certain direction or toward a certain decision? How can you tell if it is God or just a "dream"? Not every dream/vision that Paul had would also be a message from God.

Prayer: Lord, lead me in the way that you know is best. When I am ready to speak or to act in a way that is not consistent with your purpose, let your Spirit block the way as you did with Paul. Give me the courage to follow you. Amen.

Thursday, September 23

Scripture: Luke 9:51-56

As the time approached when Jesus was to be taken up into heaven, he determined to go to Jerusalem. He sent messengers on ahead of him. Along the way, they entered a Samaritan village to prepare for his arrival, but the Samaritan villagers refused to welcome him because he was determined to go to Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to consume them?" But Jesus turned and spoke sternly to them, and they went on to another village.

Observation: This scripture marks a turning point in the Gospel of Luke. The NRSV translation put it this way: [Jesus] set his face to go to Jerusalem. It was time to turn toward Jerusalem and all that would await Jesus – ultimately the crucifixion and resurrection. Today's reading indicates Jesus was "determined to go." Nothing would distract him from the destination and those who would follow him must not hesitate. It was time. When villagers did not welcome them, Jesus told them to keep moving.

Application: When have you been certain about an important decision, so certain that nothing would distract you or interrupt you? Maybe it was when your child experienced a crisis and nothing would keep you from running to their aid. Or maybe it was the sudden awareness of a need and the someone who should help was you. This month, Messiah has been collecting funds to assist those who are struggling with the aftermath of Hurricane Ida.

Prayer: God, thank you for those times when it was clear that I should be the one to help. When I come face-to-face with human need, help me to turn toward that need and be your hands and feet to respond. Amen.

Friday, September 24

Scripture: John 13:36-38; John 21:15-19

Simon Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered, "Where I am going, you can't follow me now, but you will follow later." Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I'll give up my life for you." Jesus replied, "Will you give up your life for me? I assure you that you will deny me three times before the rooster crows."

When they finished eating, Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" Simon replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." Jesus asked a second time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Simon replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Take care of my sheep." He asked a third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was sad that Jesus asked him a third time, "Do you love me?" He replied, "Lord, you know everything; you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. I assure you that when you were younger you tied your own belt and walked around wherever you wanted. When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and another will tie your belt and lead you where you don't want to go." He said this to show the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. After saying this, Jesus said to Peter, "Follow me."

Observation: Peter had an epic fail. With absolute confidence, he promised to follow Jesus, even if it meant sacrificing his own life. But when he stood at the crossroads, facing the moment when it might very well require his life, he failed not once but three times. Yet later, the risen Jesus welcomed Peter back into relationship. "Peter, do you love me?" Grace prevailed. And Peter would eventually be martyred for his faith.

Application: Our God is a God of second chances, third chances, and umpteen chances. Not that we do not take seriously what choices we make. We are not meant to take advantage of God's generosity, but thankfully, we *can* take advantage of God's generosity. And when we fail, let's fail forward into the arms of Christ who waits to lead us onward. Let go of the past, and walk on!

Prayer: God of the second chances, be near me when I fall so that I can see your grace and receive your encouragement to try again. And help me to be as generous to others as you continue to be to me. Amen.

Saturday, September 25

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Don't you know that all the runners in the stadium run, but only one gets the prize? So run to win. Everyone who competes practices self-discipline in everything. The runners do this to get a

crown of leaves that shrivel up and die, but we do it to receive a crown that never dies. So now this is how I run—not without a clear goal in sight. I fight like a boxer in the ring, not like someone who is shadowboxing. Rather, I'm landing punches on my own body and subduing it like a slave. I do this to be sure that I myself won't be disqualified after preaching to others.

Observation: Paul spoke of his own journey and referred to his life and ours as a race. The race he was thinking of may have been the marathon of Greek tradition. What Paul has learned is that to win a race, five things must happen: We must run in such a way as to get the prize, we must undergo strict training (or self-discipline), we must run with purpose (with “a clear goal in sight”), we must run efficiently (not “like someone who is shadowboxing”), and we must avoid disqualification.

Application: We may be standing at a crossroads uncertain which way to go. We may be running a race we don't quite understand. But we have a compass: Jesus Christ. He is the one who sets our direction. When we line up with him, our lives have purpose and meaning. Lose the compass, and we lose our way. In what ways do you check your compass each day?

Prayer: Merciful Savior, you have called me to run the race of faith with joy, trust, commitment and love. When I stand at a crossroads, uncertain, lost, or confused, thank you that I am never alone, for you are always with me to guide, support, comfort, and love. Amen.