### James 3:13-4:8 New International Version (NIV)

**13**Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. **14**But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. **15**Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. **16**For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

**17**But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. **18**Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

**4**What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? **2**You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. **3**When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

**4**You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. **5**Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? **6**But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

“God opposes the proud  
    but shows favor to the humble.”

**7**Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. **8**Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

**Mark 9:30-37** New International Version (NIV)

**30**They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, **31**because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” **32**But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

**33**They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” **34**But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

**35**Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”

**36**He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them,**37**“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

Here ends this morning’s lessons. May God add a blessing to our understanding and our living out God’s Word.

“The Very Last”

The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In our increasingly pluralistic and certainly more secular world, you may find it challenging, as I sometimes do, to proclaim your faith in one who *reigns over* you. We know that claiming to know a single path to salvation, by whatever name, will stir discussion at best and often will stir dissension. Still, we gather here because we aver that Jesus, the one we call Christ, has taught and led us in a way that yields peace and love. For some of us, the word salvation has much to do with what we look forward to, with a focus on what comes after these bodies of ours die; for some of us, salvation has to do with a sense of responsibility to our connected world, our communal humanity. Knowing how to be and how to love has so often been tied to what we believe, such that human beings have constructed whole religions; dogmatic principles have been defined. This morning, I invite us to listen to the scripture lessons we have heard, knowing that our one God yearns for us to be reconciled to one another, to the earth, and to the one who created everything. The stuff of religion, debated and argued, may have little to do with God, though we certainly have a great deal to learn from people of faith who have sought the same salvation, the same reconciliation. We have a great deal to learn, a great deal of wisdom to attain on our path to fuller loving.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega.” In several verses of the book of Revelation, Jesus describes himself as the Alpha and the Omega—the first and the last. In the first several centuries of Christianity, the Greek letters that mean, essentially, A and Z, were carved into monuments, painted into portraits of Jesus, essentially representing the sense that Jesus, our Lord, has been from the beginning, and will be throughout eternity, without end—or until the end, which he predicts in some of the same passages will be soon, marked by his return.

I am sure that Jesus would be more than a little surprised to know that in thinking about the Book of Revelation this week, and about James’ and Mark’s verses that have to do with community, among other things—I’m sure Jesus would be surprised that I found myself remembering the Charlton Heston movie from the 70s called *The Omega Man*. Truthfully, it was only because of the title that it first crossed my mind. However, though we may talk a long time about the disciples’ lack of understanding of Jesus, and may know that James finds fault with the pull of worldly things, both of today’s lessons can also be read to have everything to do with community. You see, Jesus’ lessons to us as recounted in the Gospels are rarely about the worth of any individual, even in relationship to him. Jesus’ life and death were about *other people*, and in no uncertain terms, he lets us know that our own goal should not be individual greatness, but to be in humble relationship with others.

We have been hearing a lot from James this month, and much of his letter describes the Wisdom that can control our behaviors in ways that are pleasing to God. Sondra Hack Polaski of Union Presbyterian Seminary writes about this morning’s reading that James ends up by telling us in less gentle terms that we should not be contentious. Polaski writes humorously that he grows contentious in arguing against contentiousness. Still, at the heart of James’ letter is a desire that God’s people, that Christ’s church care for one another. James writes in the hope that those who have chosen to follow Jesus will not follow the economic pull of the world, but will be community with a different bottom line. When we think about Jesus’ words as we hear them in today’s gospel lesson from Mark, we might consider that we are meant to be community with a different bottom, period. You see, with Jesus, we have to be ready to have our expectations of what is good and desirable completely upended. We have to be ready to have our Alpha become Omega. And don’t worry if this seems a little confusing to you. We’re in good company in not quite understanding how our Prince of Peace; how the one meant to usher in the reign of God could allow himself to be the lowliest, even to the point of crucifixion. Our confusion may be right in line with the disciples’ own.

The gospel of Mark is, throughout it, revealing of Jesus’ plan, and just as revealing of the disciples’ inability to understand it. What do you mean that our savior has to die? This is a pretty basic question, isn’t it? It doesn’t make sense to me sometimes that the one whom God had sent—that God in all of God’s power and glory—couldn’t or wouldn’t simply overthrow the powers on earth. When we listen very carefully to both of today’s lessons, though, trusting that God will indeed be both beginning AND end, this can make more sense.

Overthrowing? Power? Isn’t Jesus all about a new way, and one that doesn’t jibe with our usual sense of one leader in the front, and a bunch of underlings following after, sometimes secretly and often openly vying for that front position? Can you imagine how embarrassed the disciples must have been when Jesus asked them what they were talking about as they walked together? “Well, er, uh, Jesus, we uh, were wondering which of us was the greatest of them all!” Oh, guys, don’t you get it? What might each of you do to make the one beside you great? I may have shared here before my occasional frustration when I taught at a Quaker school in the 80s. Our faculty meetings made decisions by consensus. Having always been part of votes that were decided by various definitions of majority rule, the idea of working together toward total consensus was intriguing, but also sometimes frustrating. I will add, though, that by the close of every meeting—sometimes very long meetings—no one ever left feeling as though they had gotten the short end of a decision. No one ended up feeling as though they had lost. I wondered from time to time if this is what disagreement and eventual agreement would look like in God’s realm.

Do you also imagine a community in which no one is greater than another? In which there is no single winner at the expense of a lot of losers? In which any one person’s success can only happen when everyone wins? Let me phrase this a bit differently: Don’t you also imagine a *world* in which there is no single winner, or group of winners, at the expense of a lot of losers? In which one person’s feast is not at the expense of another’s famine? In which one person’s, or party’s, or nation’s stability and comfort is not at the expense of another’s?

Hey Mom, when I grow up I want to be a servant! What!? What parent would have as their greatest hope for their child that he or she would serve others? Well, I am thinking I would. My Alpha and my Omega, our Christ asks that we all be this way; that we all serve one another. It is when we get stuck thinking about our individual good fortune and comfort first that we forget we are all in this together. I cannot be first when one among us therefore must be last. Jesus spoke it plain, and James helped us to understand it even more clearly.

**“13**Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. **14**But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. **15**Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. **16**For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.”

Deeds done in humility. Wow. Decision making in which everyone comes to consensus. Community in which there is no one’s gain at the expense of another. For those of you who may not have seen the movie I referred to earlier, *The Omega Man*, know that it ends with the death of the protagonist, who has, not unsymbolically, left behind a protective serum created from his blood. The community of humans that remain will continue to exist because of his gift to them. Sound familiar? We have a lot that reminds us of the ways in which Jesus has served us. We celebrate them when we share in the sacrament of Communion. We look at them when we gaze at the cross. So, my question this morning is what we do and what we leave behind that reveals how we also serve others. Are we still trying very hard to be the greatest among us, or are we confidently acting in the humble knowledge that when we do for others we are doing for the Lord?

I know the supportive love of this community. I hear the grateful words of thanks for prayers of healing and of comfort. I know from strangers that we have a reputation for joy and togetherness—it sometimes looks like blueberries; it sometimes looks like soup or a gift card—time and treasures that allow others to eat, though maybe not their fill. What do we do, though, that also lets people around us know that we really don’t count ourselves better or first? How do we create community in which there are none left behind? What do we say and do each and every day that proclaims we have but one leader, who is the Christ, and that in loving Jesus we love everyone else as well? Did you hear that question? What do we say and do each day that proclaims we have but on leader, Jesus, and that in loving him, we love everyone else as well?

We have a choice with every word we speak and every action we take. We can lift others up—in our regard, in our esteem, in working to make others simply feel good. We do this with our words. We can support others, making sure they are just as comfortable and content as we are, working to make sure that others—throughout the world—all God’s children—have what they need to live. We do this with our actions. Maybe this feels like a stretch beyond the kind of individual desire for acclaim or greatness that Jesus heard the disciples squabbling about. Still, we know it’s true. We shuffle around, trying to build ourselves up. Our Alpha and Omega—he who would be first and last not only for the world, but in our lives—Our Alpha and Omega asks that we be servants first, building up others, trusting in *Jesus* that we will land on our feet together with other comfortable others. May it be so for us.