

# Draw Near

September 20, 2009  
James 3: 13 – 4: 10

The Reverend Heather Miner

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I'm told that in dreams, some people fly high above the clouds, while others are happy staying close to the ground. Some are superheroes while others are performers who envision people standing below oohing and aahing in appreciation of their tricks. Sometimes, in our dreams, we fall. Then we wake, shake it off, and, if we are brave, try to return to the sky. In such dreams, we are usually alone in our flying--not lifted by anything but our own unique ability. And so dreams of flying are often left for the young; those whose souls seek the strength of their own being.

As we get older we understand, sometimes through compassion for another and other times through the honesty of another, that we cannot fly on our own. Too much is left behind. For a child's reaching upward can become an adult's fixation on self. As we mature, bravery no longer means taking to the air on our own power, but trusting in that which is not of the ego's dream.

In a way we never outgrow our desire to fly, nor should we. The "how" matters.

While the ego leads us to arrogance, there are times when the flight of arrogance rashes into the mountain of truth. These moments provide the means for the holy flame to get our attention. As we fall to the ground, we have an opportunity to learn how to fly.

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

James, as a book, is set not upon a deep theological, symbolic well of meaning, but upon kitchen-like practicality. Faith without works is dead, Kathy Kipp reminded us when our conversation turned to seeking Logos volunteers. The phrase comes straight out of James.

James is about the good life. He leads us to ask of our walk in this life...is it Kalos, beautiful? Is my way of living, moving, being... good? Am I gentle, meek, humble?

This examination is the root of wisdom.

Be warned: we are not meant to answer "yes," nor are we meant to simply say "no." This is not another test to pass, but it is a way to reflect on the day. Let's entertain that somewhere this week we lived beautifully. Let's entertain, that somewhere this week, we didn't.

I'm in a mothers' group on Fridays, and I'm reminded again and again how mothers often feel like they are something out of a horror story rather than fitting for an artist's portrait. So often we feel much more a part of a late Picasso than of a Mary Cassatt.

It's not just motherhood...

The man thanks God that this day he has not let anyone down, he has not spoken an unkind word, he has not forgotten anything he needs to do, he has not once made a mistake. Then the alarm sounds, 5:30, time to get up.

Yes, this life distorts the beauty of our walk. It is why we need to get away from it all. We head to the mountain to break free of what is making us less beautiful, less good, less humble. In the grandeur crafted by God, the trivia that intrudes on our being is forgotten. Yet, if we can only be beautiful on a mountain top, our world, God's creation, is in great trouble.

In this scripture from James there is no call to the mountain. And there is no assurance of pardon—no simple confession of sin for Jesus to take away. Instead,

there is this call to examine ourselves, here, in our day to day existence. The end of the examination is not a grade but a movement; not a star but a relationship; not a comment here and there but a life-long conversation between those who've come to know and love one another deeply. That which gets in the way of our life being "beautiful" is the same cause of our not being close to God. Turn it around. When we are not close to God, our lives cannot be kalos.

This Summer I learned more about John Calvin, the person from professor Bruce Gordon who also wrote a book on Calvin to which I will refer. First, it is helpful to know that Calvin was coming of age when, in France, thanks to the printing press, the reformers had printed up placards and distributed them through the city telling of why the Pope was the devil. Leaving France, Calvin was called to remain in Geneva by a man named Farel, who had a reputation for being a fiery, no nonsense, get the Reformation moving type of preacher. Farel would take his congregation and sit in a Catholic Mass, disturbing it to the point where the Lord's Supper could not be celebrated. Then, closing the doors, he would make all the worshippers listen to one of his sermons. This was Calvin's first "mentor." He and Farel added wood to each

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other's fire. They became so sure of the truth of their gospel and the failures of Rome that they would stop at nothing to gain control of the city for the Reformation. They waged war. Their way of "getting it done" was anything but kalos, anything but wise. It wasn't long before they were both expelled from Geneva. Somehow they were surprised.

Gordon cites a letter Calvin writes to Louis du Tillet who had been a close friend of Calvin providing him sanctuary when Calvin needed it. After visiting the young Calvin in Geneva, Tillet becomes a critic of the Reformation and of Calvin, and returns to serve as a priest of the Catholic church. In the letter Calvin confesses

his 'insufficiency' for the job in Geneva saying there was a great risk that ambition might become the driving force. "I know well enough that foolish ambition might hoodwink me so as to deflect the straightforwardness of my judgment." Gordon comments: This was as close as Calvin was ever prepared to sail in admitting his errors.

Probably we are not quite as extreme as Calvin. But for those of us whose tradition comes out of Calvin, the words from James are a needed reminder. Yes, there's much to be done in our world. But if our ambition, even for the best of things, distorts our walk, distances us from wisdom, breaks us apart, we are no longer a force for God.

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your own pleasures.

These are tough words to hear, tougher to own; especially as we are trying so hard to serve God faithfully and see ourselves as being sophisticated beyond the trappings of our childhood desires. We are to stop and consider our motives?

In the first years of his ministry, I don't think Calvin ever questioned his motives in Geneva with Farel. Instead, they thought themselves prophets who had arrived in Geneva by God's plan. They had no doubt about their duty. It took a council of Reformers outside of Geneva to stop them. But the Reformers didn't stop there.

Just as Calvin's ego flight hit the mountain of truth, a man heard the call from God to show him a more enduring way to fly.

Understand, Calvin was a broken man. His first public venture in the service of God had turned out badly. He

was troubled, deeply embarrassed. Again I quote from the letter he writes du Tillet:

"Above all, on looking back and considering the perplexities which surrounded me from the first time I went to Geneva, there is nothing I dread more than returning to the charge from which I have been set free. For though when first I took it up I could discern the calling of God which held me fast and by which I consoled myself, now, in the contrary, I am in fear that I would tempt him if I were to resume so great a burden, which I have already felt to be insupportable.'

Gordon summarizes: "His [Calvin's] confidence in his calling had been seriously shaken and he drifted without clear sense of direction or purpose. ...even the continuous references to God's providence in the correspondence could not wholly mask a wounded, and very human, pride (84)."

Calvin may never have returned to Geneva, never have become the source of strength for the preachers of his time and into ours, except for the efforts of the "most significant reformer of the south-west empire (85)," Martin Bucer. He invited this broken Calvin to Strasbourg, took Calvin under his wing, and taught him to be a pastor. Calvin soared.

It is the Peacemakers who sow in peace that raise a harvest of righteousness.

The beautiful life, then, is a life that nurtures, with gentleness born of humility and wisdom, the growing seedlings of a good and faithful people. Just as there are times when we get it wrong, like Calvin, there are times when we get it so very right.

I am convinced, this past week, there were times when you lived beautifully.

Believe me when I say to you that there were moments when the wisdom from above moved through your words and deeds. There were moments when you were pure and yielding, merciful, and at peace. Moms, there were times when you were a fitting portrait for Cassatt. Those who are not Moms, there were times when, even when you had gotten out of bed, you spoke well, acted rightly, and lived wisely. As much as you are led to recall those times when you didn't, I ask you to remember those times you got it right. Feel what it felt like. Remember again that yielding doesn't mean losing and mercy doesn't mean weakness, and peace doesn't mean you are silent.

Remember, God's people, what it feels like to draw near to God.

"Do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, "God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made

to dwell in us?”

We need to remember because our neurons are so easily reordered and that which God implanted within us, God's spirit, can be sent into storage deep inside our brain, until it becomes almost inaccessible, and we lose confidence in our call.

No wonder God is jealous!

People of God, remember what it is like to draw near to the source...near to God.

Two of the enemies of the peace you just felt are envy and ambition. Thinking on it, I'm the most envious when I feel outside the group. And, I'm the most ambitious when I feel it is all up to me...that this one thing will make or break my reputation. It is these time I'm trying to, in James' parlance, "make friends with the world", trying to get someone to like me, trying to get someone to notice me, whatever the cost. Perhaps this resonates with you.

Then I come to our church, enter Chip's office, and weep, so ever glad to be under a pastor who allows me to simply be and who is always ready to draw near.

Calvin was broken when the council told him he could no longer pastor in Geneva. He argued. He fought. In the end, he yielded, because Bucer refused to let him fly alone.

Since the likes of Calvin (and my humble self) have needed help to remain true...can we admit now, without having to list the problems of this time and place, that it is simply hard, impossible, for our human hearts to, all on their own, with only the world's input, remain connected to God.

If you give me that...then...understand this: Each of us in the Church has a duty, a holy responsibility, a call to watch over at least one of God's children. Our church teaches that each of us should identify 6...have in our sight 6 people who we are willing to watch over as the Holy Spirit leads during this season.

You may pray on it. Who are your 6 this season? Who are those you will invite to the October concert, those you will invite to a retreat, those who you will make sure you greet and meet with outside of the church grounds, those you will invite onto the church grounds? Who are those you will share with about how God is moving in your life that they might hear more than just the voices of people striving to be good all on their own and not quite making it...that they might be humbled and yielded...that they might be flooded with the grace of God.

There are a lot of people out there, and even some here today, who are envious, who don't feel like they belong. There are a lot of people out there, and even some here

today who seek to prove themselves, to show themselves worthy of love. For God's sake, draw near, near to God, nearer to a few others... that the Kingdom might have a chance. We are not meant to fly alone.