

“At Face Value”
James 1:22-25
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While taking an archaeology course in college, I became fascinated by the way an archaeologist can look at our material lives- the spaces we inhabit and the things with which we fill them- and tell stories about who we are. The archaeologist trains herself to look at familiar objects with new eyes, not allowing her vision to be clouded by what she thinks she knows, but letting the objects speak for themselves, letting them tell their own story. At the same time as I was taking archaeology, I was teaching Sunday school to 5th and 6th graders, and I decided to try out this new way of seeing on them in the church sanctuary. I wanted to see what we could learn about ourselves by telling a new story about a familiar space, so I told them we were going on an archaeological expedition to learn about an unknown culture. I explained that they would need to forget whatever they knew about the objects they saw and try to simply notice what was present and how it was arranged.

It took them a few minutes to get the hang of it. Upon entering the sanctuary, one of them shouted out, “They had Bibles!” I played along, “What are Bibles?” And he corrected himself, “They have long books with lots of words in them!” Soon they began to explore the space like archaeologists and to notice things they had not seen before. They found patterns between the objects which revealed information about the lives of the people we imagined used this space. They noticed that there were lots of windows in the room, many looking out onto a beautiful courtyard, and they suspected that these people might have valued nature and light. At one end of the room, they found a table over ten feet long with no chairs around it and no signs of crumbs or water stains, and its strange shape and lack of functionality stumped them. Behind that table they found a large tiled enclosure with a drain at the bottom. They figured that was some kind of ancient hot tub. Looking with new eyes, they found clues that this was a place where many people gathered, where words were read and sung, where symbols were important.

But they also found that not everything we learned matched what we knew of our community. For instance, part of a large quotation on the front wall said, “We are all brothers,” which did not seem to account for the many women in our congregation. Likewise, the weaving, which hung on the front of the pulpit, depicted a sword, which seemed like a strange symbol for our peace-loving community. As we learned, spaces quite frequently tell a different story than the one we tell about them. Consider walking into a discussion-based course and finding all of the desks in neat rows facing a podium at the front, or eating at a restaurant which claims to be family friendly but has no high chairs or children’s menu, or imagine the surprise of a friend of mine, who on walking into her new dentist’s office for the first time found a dog behind the counter and pet adoption literature in the waiting room. There are the stories we tell about our stuff and the stories our stuff tell about us.

The same is true, says James, of people. We can perform a kind of archaeology on ourselves, pretending not to know anything, and exploring how our actions and our words match up. For James, there are the stories we tell about our lives, and the stories our lives tell about us. We may be doers of the word, or we may simply be hearers who deceive themselves. This is nothing new of course; James is merely pointing out the human tendency to be hypocritical, to say one thing and do another. We may pay lip service to environmentalism but continue to buy Styrofoam; we may consider ourselves pacifists but turn a blind eye to the wars our country is fighting; we may claim to love our neighbors but secretly encourage our dogs to visit their lawns.

Hypocrisy is nothing new, but James' understanding of the problem is a little different. Instead of being concerned with how the hypocrites among his congregation may appear to others, he cautions them about the effect their falseness may have on themselves. James says that those who do one thing and say another forget who they are; they lose their sense of identity. He uses the analogy of looking into the mirror and immediately forgetting what you've seen. When the story I tell about myself doesn't match with the actions I take in my life, there is no way to remind myself of whom I've claimed to be. I must look into the mirror again and ask, "Who do I say that I am?" hoping that this time that chosen identity will stick, even in the absence of any action to confirm it.

Earlier in his letter, James tells his congregation he wants them to mature fully in their faith, suggesting that he understands them as spiritual adolescents. And this passage seems to confirm that reading. What time in life sees us in front a mirror more than those teenage years? When else are we so concerned with manufacturing an identity for ourselves, often out of whole cloth? I remember during my own grungy adolescence donning one of my five pairs of Chuck Taylor's All Stars, some baggy and beat-up blue jeans, and a raggedy olive green t-shirt that was more hole than shirt. And if I was going to the coffee house with my older, cooler friends I would throw on a ratty gray cardigan I thought Kurt Cobain would approve of. I would go to the mirror and study myself carefully, making sure I had achieved a look of complete indifference. I tried on an identity and hoped it would stick. Yet, while I often associate that kind of posturing with my teenage years, I am not sure it really goes away. I suspect, as James appears to, that adults just get more adept at hiding their deception, better at playing the part they've chosen, even if they still can't quite fool themselves.

This fall I led a small group for those who are living with anxiety. I wanted to lead the group partly as an excuse to do a little bit more work with my own anxiety. As I explored spiritual resources for dealing with worry and fear, what I realized was that anxiety has a lot to do with the stories we live, especially when they are very different from the stories we tell. In *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*, which was one of the resources we used for the group, the anxious stories from which many of us live are named "Mistaken Beliefs." As a group we took an inventory to determine which of the most common mistaken beliefs each of us held. We read around 60 statements and marked them with a number between 1 and 4 depending on how strongly we identified with sentences like, "I feel powerless or helpless;" "If things are going well, watch out!" "It's very hard to be alone;" "I should always be competent;" "It's risky to trust people," and many more. Maybe even one or two statements you've made to yourself.

When I added up my scores, they suggested that the story from which I was living was “It’s not OK to make mistakes; I have to be perfect,” and that’s a very different story from the one I tell about my life. For me, as a minister and as a Christian, I tell a story of trust and faith. My life is built upon the belief that God loves me, that I am cared for, watched over, forgiven at the most fundamental level, and thus I need not worry. I am loved not for what I do but for who I am, and who I am is known more deeply and fully by that God than by anyone. My totality, the mixed bag that I am, my mistakes and my imperfections, are known and loved. This is the story I believe. But as I dug with the small group, I realized that it is not always the story I live. Many times I live from a place of anxiety, while telling a story of peace.

Maybe perfectionism is not your issue; maybe you relate more to one of the other beliefs. Maybe you live the story, “My worth depends upon the approval of others;” or “My worth depends on my achievements;” or “If I trust someone else, I’ll lose control;” or “I’m powerless to do anything about my life.” Or maybe anxiety is not your issue. Maybe there is another story you are living. For James’ audience it had to do with money. His congregation was divided into the haves and the have-nots. And the haves, even though they told the same story- of love for neighbor and good news to the poor- they placed themselves above the have-nots. James says the greeters at his church see someone with a lot of jewelry on and direct them to a good seat, but when a poor person comes in they tell her to stand or to sit on the floor. They are telling one story and living another. Maybe you have a place in your life like that; I do.

So what do I do, when I’m living from a story which is different from the story I tell, from the story I believe? *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook* suggests constructing an affirmation to combat that mistaken belief. In our small group, we made these into breath prayers. For our group I prayed, “God of peace, you love my imperfection.” Since high school I have been using that meditation from Thich Nhat Hahn, “Breathing in, I see myself as still water; breathing out, I reflect things as they truly are.” Maybe yours would be “Spirit of Life, help me to relax;” or “I am willing to take the risk of getting close;” or “I love myself the way I am.” It is helpful to counteract our mistaken beliefs with affirmations of our goodness, our sufficiency, our strength.

But James takes it a step further. For him it is not merely about changing the story I live, bringing my actions in line with my words, it is about remembering who I am at the most basic level. James brings me back to the mirror and asks me to take a good, long look, a new look. While the New Revised Standard Version which we read translates, “they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror,” a literal translation of the Greek is, “they are like those who look at the face of their birth and on going away immediately forget what they were like.” James believes his congregants are not simply forgetting the story of who they are today, but the story of who they are, who they have always been, the story of their creation, the story which links their story with all others. James holds the mirror to his readers and asks them to look deeply, asks us to look deeply. Look beyond the jewelry; look beyond the make-up; look beyond the clothes; look beyond the haircut; look beyond the wrinkles; look beyond the acne; look beyond the accomplishments; look beyond the failures; look beyond the scars; look beyond the brokenness; look beyond the image you’ve created to the image of your creation, the image of your birth, that *imago Dei*, the image of God.

James asks his congregation to engage in an archaeological exploration of themselves, to dig deep, to forget what they think they know about the woman or man they are seeing, to dig beneath the surface of have or have not, of worthy or unworthy, of perfect or imperfect; because he believes, and I believe, that at their core they will find a beloved child of God. He believes that when they recognize in their own faces the face of God, which has been there all along- a face they could not cover up or wash off, the face of love which is their true center, when they see that face, then they will be truly blessed. When we recognize that face, when we live from that image, then we are truly blessed. Blessed with no more need for false identities, no more need for mistaken beliefs, no more need to ask "Who am I again?" Because we know and we are known by the God in whose image we are formed. We know ourselves as the people of God, and our every action will confirm it.