

"The Maltese Cross: The Cross of Regeneration"

James 1:16-18

Midweek Lent 3

Messiah, Boerne

March 6, 2024

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Text: James 1:16-18

Dear Friends in Christ:

Deception is used quite a lot in our society. For example, magicians entertain us by using their sleight of hand tricks. Mannequins startle us when we think a real person is standing before us. And statistics can be manipulated to say just about anything a person chooses, depending on the message he or she desires to convey. So, we must ask ourselves, can anything in life be trusted?

On the other hand, many in our society tell us that we *can* be sure of what we see if they are "proven" scientifically. We use our eyes, ears, and reason to answer questions we have about the world around us, and we think that by following empirical science we can be reasonably sure about life. That is how we come to "know" things—by seeing them, feeling them, and understanding them. It's all too easy to forget how quickly and easily our eyes, ears, and minds can be deceived.

All of this affects our hearts very subtly but in a very real way. Imaginings of every sort send our lives in many

different directions. For example, we know we should provide for the future, but there are very real doubts about whether there will even be a future. We should love our neighbor, but needs are so great, and there are so many who try to take advantage of us that we don't know how to love. We want to do good, but our best efforts seem to turn to dust in our hands. We live only for ourselves and hope we don't get hurt too badly so that we can enjoy a reasonably happy lifetime before returning to dust.

This is what Luther means when he describes "the devil, the world, and our flesh" having us night and day from every imaginable angle of life. Voices from inside and out urge us to see and listen to things that are not of God. The world opens its arms to reinforce our sight and hearing with the idea that true security lies in what the world can offer, and our flesh buys into it hook, line, and sinker. All this seems magnified in our day as we are bombarded with reassurances through various media that what pleases our senses surely is what we need for security and happiness. It seems impossible to escape these insistent voices urging us to enjoy life in the way our culture dictates.

In the face of all this, our text for this evening speaks out of a context of "temptation." It's a bridge toward understanding what makes a godly life. James warns us, "Don't

be deceived" (v 16), which is what "temptation" is all about. The Greek word for "deceived" has a wide variety of associated ideas. For example, it can mean "to lead astray," "to vacillate," "absence of a goal," "to be mistaken," "aimless conduct," or "entanglement."

So, "Don't be deceived" involves more than "Don't let the wool be pulled over your eyes." It can mean, "Don't let wrong things lead you astray," or "Don't be shiftless, vacillating back and forth about what is good and doing it," or "Don't go through life without a goal, letting this or that pull you every which way," or "Don't be mistaken about what life's all about," or "Don't get entangled in things that will undo your life," or "Don't get caught up in doing any old thing with your life." There are plenty of temptations or deceits that will lead you in wrong directions. Don't let them mislead you, James says, for their tug at your heartstrings is great.

Over against this deceit, James points to what endures and provides stability amidst our wanderings. He reminds us of the ground for a godly life even when surrounded by temptation. One must have new and different eyes and ears for this entirely different world. It speaks and gives a vision quite other than the world gives. And it will create another kind of mindset, opening wholly contrasting possibilities for living from anything available purely on the basis of this world's level of

existence. It is nothing short of a "rebirth," a "regeneration" of everything—from the way we see and hear to how we live.

This life is only available "from above," James tells us, "coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (v 17). The imagery here is born of a very old way of seeing the heavens. The ancients looked at the heavens as a place where things were "established" compared to the changing nature of this earth. Although the stars "swing around" by the times of the year, there is still a "fixedness" about them. One can depend on the North Star and the constellations holding their place. Seafarers could know where they were, and lost travelers could regain their direction because the heavens could be trusted. They were the chart and compass of people in ancient times.

That is how God is, James tells us. He alone can chart your life and direct your path in safe ways, guiding you home from your wanderings. From Him comes "every good and perfect gift." Over against what the world offers you, all of which perishes and easily misleads you completely if you use these things as your goal and security, God comes down from above and becomes your shield from danger, your compass in your wanderings, and your hope in the storms of life.

To confirm us in this confidence he adds, "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of

firstfruits of all he created" (v 18). We must remember that he addresses these words to "dear brothers." These are not people who still live in darkness, for they have already received that perfect gift from the Father of lights by which they have been changed. James points again to the "word of truth" by which God chose to "give us birth." He has given us a new birth, regenerated us, given us new eyes and ears and hearts and lives. This same word continues to be necessary because deceitful temptations surround us. In this word we are to live and move and have our being, for in it God will keep us stable and on target, headed for the goal He has established, and kept on the way of God.

This "word of truth" by which we are brought forth to "be a kind of firstfruits of all he created" is more than a spoken or written word. It has become flesh and lived and died among us as our Brother. He, too, knew temptation like us. We hear Him cry out from the intensity of His temptation in the Garden of Gethsemane. His words from the cross about God-forsakenness tear at our hearts as He speaks of His temptation to think that God had led Him, literally, on a dead-end path. So, this Brother of ours on the cross cries out in temptation but with yet unwavering faith that His God-forsakenness is not without hope. He overcomes our human plight by enduring what we endure in our stead and for our salvation.

So He went into the very grave for which we are all headed. This is the "word of truth" that, in fleshly form, gives us confidence that the Word spoken by God and in behalf of God is not an empty word. His taking up our death is, in fact, the last word to which we must look when we are tempted to think that God has forsaken us and left us to our own devices. The taunting voices that surround us are the same voices that came to Jesus on the cross. They come to us now in our trouble-tempting voices, pointing deceptively to visions of life without a cross, of pleasure without pain, of a life lived only in self-fulfillment without any of the blessings God makes available to us "from above."

Faith is the word that describes your connection to all those blessings from God. It's where what happened "then and there" becomes the "here and now" for you. On the cross God offers you truth that comes from the Father of all truth. He calls your ear from all other words to His Word alone. He calls your eyes from that limited vision of this world to what is revealed from above. He calls your mind and heart and life from the smallness of this world's thinking and living to a way that is as large as the heart of God.

The form of the cross that holds our attention this evening—the Maltese Cross—speaks to this. It is said to have been created with a strong accent on its eight points as symbols

of the eight beatitudes. It is called the "Regeneration Cross" sometimes on this account, for regeneration is not something that happens in a moment and then stops. Rebirth gives rise not only to new ways of seeing and hearing but also to a new way of life. The beatitudes speak of the blessedness of life that is grounded in God: Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those persecuted for righteousness' sake. These "blessed ones" are people of the new birth, the remaking of life into a "gift from above" to the world.

Hard though it may be to imagine, you are God's gift to the world. Born again in the waters of Holy Baptism, claimed by God "from above" and given back to the world in Christ's name as His child. Luther puts it this way, speaking of the continuing power of our baptism: "The old person daily drowns and dies and a new person daily comes forth and arises." You, with your sins and the deceits of the world clinging to you, are daily swallowed up in the jaws of Jesus' death, where your sins are forgiven so that you can daily begin anew. That is what happens when "the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows," visits you with His "good and perfect gift . . . from above" and gives you "birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created."

This is what Luther means when he speaks of our redeemed position in which we are "to live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness."

Dear Friends in Christ, it is to such a blessed life that you are pointed by the eight points of the Maltese Cross this evening. You are the children of God, given birth from above through the cross to go forth in the name of God as those hungering and thirsting after righteousness, as the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers of the earth. Be what you are, the blessed of the earth, so that the earth through you might be blessedly reborn. Amen.