

**+ James 1:1-12 + Series: Blessed... + Theme: Blessed Are Those Who Persevere! +
+ 23rd Sunday after Pentecost: Commemoration of St. James of Jerusalem + 23 October 2016 +**

Nestled at the base of a low mountain in central Vermont, you'll find the tiny hamlet of Plymouth Notch. There's not much to it—a couple frame and clapboard houses, a general store with post office and a small home on the back, a church, a couple of barns, an old one-room schoolhouse, a small cheese factory, and a cemetery. You'd probably ignore it as you drive the winding two-lane road through town, if you didn't notice a sign directing you to visit the President Calvin Coolidge State Historic Site.

You quickly realize that Plymouth Notch is the historic site. That small handful of buildings have been preserved to honor Calvin Coolidge—the 30th president of the United States. He was born there in 1872. He grew up there before going off to school in Massachusetts. He was visiting family there in 1923 as vice president, when he was notified that Pres. Harding had unexpectedly died of a heart attack, so his father—a notary public—swore him into office as the new president by kerosene light in the family sitting room. “Silent Cal” spent his summers there during his presidency, and he and six other generations of his family are buried in the cemetery.¹

In the visitors' center, you learn all about this shy president who led our country during the Roaring Twenties—an honest man who prided himself on integrity and being extremely frugal while America partied. You find artifacts from his life and presidency. You can see videos and photos that talk about his rise through politics. Yet before you leave the visitors center, among all the folksy artwork and artifacts, you might notice a bronze plaque on the wall with a quote that's been popularly attributed to Silent Cal.

The truth is, the original quote came from a motivational book for young people written by a New England pastor back in 1881. Around 1928, President Coolidge quoted it in one of his speeches, but the newspapers failed to attribute the original writer. He wrote, ***“Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan ‘press on’ has solved and will always solve the problem of the human race.”***²

Even though he didn't originally come up with the quote, it says a lot about the man. Persistence and determination and perseverance were important to him. He prized the mentality that with enough hard work and persistence, you can pull yourself up by your bootstraps and press on. With enough determination and perseverance, you can keep moving forward no matter the challenge—and Silent Cal had faced his own share of challenges. His mother had died when he was 12, his teenage sister several years later. As governor of Massachusetts, he was forced to deal with labor riots in Boston. He became president unexpectedly and lost a son during his presidency. Coolidge firmly believed in the need to have a stiff upper lip when life throws problems at you. If you just work hard enough, you can solve any problem.

As noble as that might sound, is that really how we should face our problems, our challenges, our difficulties in this life? Now Silent Cal's approach may not be as common today as that attitude may have once been in our country, but you still hear it, don't you? “I'm sorry for your unexpected loss. I hope you can be strong and make it through.” “With all those problems in your life, you just have to work through them.” “Your life seems pretty broken right now. All you can do is pick up the broken pieces and put them back together.” Cold comfort, isn't it? Advice like that only turns problems and challenges and difficulties back on you and your ability or lack thereof to get out of them. Not much help, is it?

So how should you face the problems or challenges or difficulties that confront you in this life? Well, you can either take Silent Cal's stoic “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” advice or look for some better advice.

Now this morning we're celebrating a minor festival. We're remembering a faithful believer named James of Jerusalem, who lived and served during the earliest years of the Christian church. We're not worshiping him as if he were some demigod who could connect us to the true God, but instead today we sit at his feet and learn how to persevere in our life of faith.

James lived during a busy and exciting time in the Christian church. The good news of Jesus was radiating out from Jerusalem to the regions of Judea and Samaria and Galilee farther and farther like ripples in water out to

¹ https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/presidents/calvin_coolidge_homestead.html

² <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2012-06-11/calvin-coolidge-persisted-in-deed-if-not-in-word>

peoples and regions across the known world. Persecution had not yet descended on the Christian church, but it was still a difficult time for many early Christians. A severe drought had hit the area along the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea. That area is typically quite arid, so a drought can be devastating. Soon a famine set in around Jerusalem and spread throughout the region. Most people had little money to pay the skyrocketing prices on food, so they were both hungry and poor. Among all those people were the earliest Christians. Many were quite immature in their faith—and the severe problems they were facing sorely tested their trust in God.

To these scattered Christians facing hardship and hunger, James sent a letter encouraging them to remain faithful and to keep putting their faith into action. Who was this James? It wasn't either of Jesus' two apostles both of whom were named James. Instead someone even closer to Jesus—his half-brother, a man who at one time along with his other siblings had rejected their older brother Jesus thinking he was out of his mind. James had rejected the fact that Jesus was not just Mary's son, but also truly God. However, at some point during the 40 days after Jesus had risen from the dead, he appeared to James, who, with open eyes of faith, finally understood that Jesus was not just his half-brother, but his Savior-God. Eventually James became a leader in the early church in Jerusalem and later played an important role in welcoming non-Jews into the Christian faith.

It was this James who wrote to those scattered, hungry, hurting and struggling Christians. So what did he tell them to do in the face of their various problems? Did he urge them to be persistent and determined? Pick up the pieces and soldier on with a stiff upper lip? No, this unlikely leader took their focus away from what they could do and showed them, instead, what God was doing for them. ***“Consider it all joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”*** Consider it...joy? You can imagine those struggling Christians scratching their heads as they read that statement, but keep in mind what James is saying here!

He's not saying that ***“trials of many kinds”*** are joy or make you joyful, but you can find joy in those times of difficulty and hardship and struggle when you consider what God is doing through them. ***“The testing of your faith develops perseverance.”*** In those hard times when your faith is tested most, the Lord is actually refining your faith like gold refined and purified in fire. Much like that beautifully precious metal that results when all the impurities are burned off, perseverance or endurance—the ability to hold out and stand firm in the face of difficulty—comes out shining brightly.

This isn't your own doing. This isn't your work or your effort or your strength, but the Lord's doing and he wants you to let that refining process run its course. Gold is at its greatest worth when it is fully refined. The same goes for God's refining process. When your faith is tested, you grow stronger in your faith. You grow more mature in your faith. Look back on certain times of particular, personal difficulty and hardship. Can you recall what and who you were before you faced those trials and now what and who you have become once they were finished? Through those times of greatest difficulty and testing, faith grew. I've seen that happen in my life. Have you seen it in yours?

When the Lord allows trials and challenges to come into your life, you come to realize what you have in Christ and what you still need. You grow in wisdom and understanding, but you don't grow because of your wisdom or because of your strength or even because of what you possess. No, you grow because of what God accomplishes in you. Martin Luther used to call it *tentatio*—a time of trial or challenge when the Lord uses what you have learned in his Word and what you are learning in his Word to help you grow stronger and deeper. Key to that was also time spent in prayer. James also speaks of that and urges us to pray confidently trusting that our God is able to do what he has promised. ***“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.”***

Rather than get tossed around like a wave of the sea, we trust in the Lord who persevered for us. We trust in the Lord who persevered in the face of a life of poverty and the always-present-in-the-background subtle ridicule because his birth didn't match up with his parents' wedding day. We trust in the Lord who persevered in the face of opposition and attacks and attempts to make him what he was not—an earthly king. We trust in the Lord who persevered even through the unbelief of his own siblings and the foolishness of his own disciples. We trust in the Lord who persevered even as he turned his face towards Jerusalem and willingly went like a lamb to the slaughter to face betrayal and rejection and suffering and a criminal's death. We trust in the Lord

who persevered in the face of death itself and rose from the dead. We trust in the Lord who persevered because he loved you and me so much.

So in faith, we offer our prayers to him. We recognize how God refines our faith through testing and even find joy knowing that we have a Lord who has been there and who understands where we're at when troubles come up. So with hearts trusting in our Lord, we persevere beneath the cross. We endure under trial until the Lord brings us home, and what do you know! The Lord has a happy, blessed ending waiting for us in the glories of heaven! ***"Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial, because when they have stood the test, they will receive the crown of life."***

Not your effort. Not your persistence or determination, but the work of our gracious God who gives you strength to persevere until he brings you home. When you face trouble, when you face problems, when you face challenges, when you face testing of your faith, don't lean on yourself. Don't lean on your own persistence and determination. Simply pressing on under your own strength won't solve your problems, but instead persevere with a heart full of confident faith in Jesus trusting that he knows what's best and has promised to bless you in the end. For this is what he has promised: Blessed are you who persevere in Christ beneath the cross until the end! Amen.