

Sermon When it all seems like too much

Note: This sermon is written in sections so that a variety of persons may take part in its delivery or it can be shared by one person. You do not want to read the titles. They are provided to assist you in understanding the outline of the sermon. The sermon gives examples from current situations to illustrate the scripture teachings. You may use the examples provided or take the opportunity to contextualize the sermon for your own congregation. Think about local and world projects your WMS group or congregation has supported.

(Section 1)

Introduction

James says: “ My brothers and sisters, wherever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. Let endurance have its full effect so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.” *(James 1:2-4)*

Agreement with James

As we read these words, we knowingly nod in agreement having had our share of challenges in life. We can all identify examples of the kind of wisdom and maturity we have gained from hardship. Some of us have faced being declared redundant only to discover a new field of work we would not have tried otherwise. Others will be able to attest to the fact that the loss of a loved one, while so painful in the moment, taught you how to be far more compassionate and sympathetic. Most of us can name a traumatic set-back that became a profound teachable moment. While we would prefer not to go through these experiences, we are grateful for the lessons learned. We can agree with James that difficulty can bring maturity and growth.

(Section 2)

Disagreement with James

We can agree with James until one tragedy or hardship piles on top of another. Then we rail against life. When burden upon burden takes its toll, we cry out with the Psalmist, “I say to God, my rock, why have you forgotten me?” *(Psalm 42:9)* Some of us have been through those times when there seemed to be a conspiracy against our happiness; or that some hidden voodoo doll was being pierced at our expense.

1. Mary, for example, not only has to adjust to the paralysis in her left side due to a massive stroke at the age of 57 but now she has to give up her home and relocate to a chronic care facility. Her only son lives miles away.
2. Take John as another example. Not only does he have to deal with his parents’ separation and divorce but now he has to listen to his father’s endless complaints and his mother’s constant tears. Then, because the court says he is old enough, he learns that he has to choose which parent he will live with.
3. And how about Arturo who watched his family massacred by the military and now has to sleep in a different spot every night because he may well be next.

Yes, difficulties can lead to growth, maturity, and wisdom – even joy if they are doled out in shovelfuls. However, when a truck load is dumped on us, or others, then it all seems to be too much! We sincerely cry out, “I can’t take it anymore. How much can one person endure?”

Rizpah’s Story

Perhaps Rizpah has much to teach us about how to endure compounding hardships. She can also help us to understand how to offer care appropriately to those we know caught in hard circumstances. Whether it is caring for our neighbour right next door or on the other side of the planet, Rizpah teaches us the power of endurance and the power of not giving in to hopelessness.

Let us review her story. She was the concubine of King Saul. Being a concubine meant she had no value. She was like cattle to be used or disposed of however the King chose. Plus, in her day and culture, women were assigned their worth based on the males to which they were connected. So on top of her lowly concubine status she was the property of a King who had lost power and was killed. She was now lower than low; tainted goods; war booty. She could expect nothing from life except marginalization. No one in the community would willingly have anything to do with her.. If she hadn't already suffered enough, King David hands over her sons and grandsons to be hung by the Gibeonites. They were convinced that this was the only way they would be saved from famine. Rizpah, with no power or rights, loses her family. All she is able to do is to wave sackcloth, day and night, over her families' bodies to prevent the indignities of exposure to the hot sun and vultures.

Like the mothers in Rwanda, the Sudan and many other places, Rizpah has to watch the horrors of war and powerlessness overwhelm her and her loved ones. In shock, we watch a tsunami wash over those already dying of starvation. In disbelief, we watch young children maimed and stolen away into slavery in the sub-Sahara. In horror, we watch helplessly as young children are forced to be soldiers in Uganda. If we open our eyes, we can too easily see such suffering in our world today. If we look, We are almost immobilized by the hardships around us. As we observe such hardships, James' words about maturity coming from suffering seem to ring hollow in our ears. But when those moments come, we need to learn from Rizpah and how she handled her profound suffering and circumstances.

(Section 3)

Rizpah's response

What did she do?

1. Rizpah avoided hopelessness because she faced her circumstances with realism.

She wasted little time pondering the question of whether or not life was fair. Such a question is left to the privileged. Instead, she recognized that she was powerless to stop a king from killing her sons. She could have spent all of her time being angry and ranting but instead she took the only action she could. She went to the field where her family lay dead and she did what she could. She waved a cloak, day and night, to prevent the further indignities that would naturally come to anyone killed in those circumstances.

When we face hardship or as we are ministering to others, it is also important to face the truth of the situation. As we are engaged in mission, it is critical that we avoid 'Polly-ann-ish' views of the world and sweet(band-aid?) solutions that have more to do with our need to stay protected than they do with facing the reality of the situation. We can turn a blind eye or we can see a situation with rose-coloured glasses, but if we

are to learn from Rizpah we will deal with reality with all of its raw, destructive dimensions.

If we face the truth of the situation we will not foolishly convince a woman caught in a violent relationship that she needs to find a way to make her family work. If we recognize the true nature of alcoholism, we will not lecture persons to simply stop drinking. If we have a loved one on the streets, we will not be naïve enough to suggest that coming home will solve their burdens.

Rizpah teaches us to shed our romantic notions about how life should be and instead she calls us to fully enter into the truth of a person's situation and work for justice and healing within their circumstances. Those who approach mission realistically are those who seek to understand what the true nature of the situation and then offer assistance in Christ's name. Any of you will be able to tell stories of people who helped you most in compounding suffering. They were not the ones who decided what was best for you, rather they offered you understanding, comfort, and resources to help you get back on your own two feet. They are persons who are willing to enter into life and death without pause, even in the worst of circumstances. They deal with the truth, not platitudes and truisms.

(Section 4)

2. Rizpah avoided hopelessness because she wasted little time in self-pity.

Her circumstances were even worse than the great majority around her. She spent little time wallowing in how her life could be. Instead, she recognized what she could do given her limitations. Similarly, Isaac Watts turned his energies from the ministry into hymn writing because of failing health. The challenge comes to all of us. You can choose to curl up in a ball and give up or find new ways of being, given your circumstances. Whether you're a refugee walking miles to live in a hut on the edge of a city; whether you have lost some of your physical capability, or whether you are one of the only survivors of a tidal wave, a time comes when you have to choose to work with life or give up. Rizpah faced a worse situation than most, and yet she found the resources to keep going.

When we are engaged in helping others in such circumstances, the worst we can do is to box them into a corner and treat them like victims. In fact, some of the most courageous, tenacious people in the world are the ones who have suffered far more than we can imagine. Their secret? They have chosen to find new hope and to refashion their lives.

Nacho, for example, was one such person. He lived in Guatemala and he felt the call to ministry during a time when the military was threatened by any grass-roots movement. As he studied God's word, he became convinced that he needed to help the poor of his village unite to farm their meager land. United, they could generate far more income to feed their families. It was not long before he started receiving death threats. Undeterred, Nacho continued his work, sleeping in different caves at night in case the military came for him while he slept. One morning he returned and in horror he observed that the military had indeed come through in the night, killing all the men and older children in his community. Homes were razed to the ground and all that was left were a few aged and pregnant women. Instead of giving up, he

walked with the remaining villagers for miles to the outskirts of Guatemala City. There they put together a few shacks in which they could be protected from the elements. One kind person offered them a hose for a supply of water. Each day he continued to preach God's word and encourage people not to lose hope. Many months later, Nacho went missing. The women searched everywhere and found him cut by a machete on his face and deeply gashed in his stomach. Did the women give up? No. They rushed back to their shacks and found anything they could sell. They raised enough money to put Nacho in hospital. To this day, he continues to share the Good News of the gospel and the promise that evil will not ultimately be victorious.

Rizpah and Nacho could have given up. They had plenty of good reasons to give up, but they refused to allow their circumstances to defeat them.

(Section 5)

3. Rizpah did not give in to hopelessness; rather she found creative power in powerlessness.

She did what she could. She may not have been able to stop the senseless murder of her family but she was not going to roll over without exposing the injustice. Day in and day out, she waved the sackcloth until many likely began to question King David's benevolence. She never gave up hope that her plight would be heard and in some way relieved.

In the end, she brought King David to his knees. She embarrassed the king and exposed her horrors to the point where he could do nothing but take action. He collected the bones of Saul, Jonathan, and her family members and buried all of them with dignity in a proper grave. Normally he would not have given the time of day for someone in his kingdom considered to be so worthless, but suddenly Rizpah could not be ignored. She found a way to draw attention to his cruelty, forcing him to at least try to set it right in the eyes of others.

There are volumes written about Christians who refused to allow evil to have the final say. Stories of people who fought slavery in North America and apartheid in South Africa inspire us. We are called to follow after the likes of Rizpah to take our stands boldly and creatively to combat the hardships of our present day. Of course, we have the greatest story of inspiration of all in Jesus Christ. He died a criminal's death, seemingly without power, only to conquer all evil and death itself. Can we do other than to follow our Saviour's example?

Christ teaches us that we should never give up in the midst of overwhelming odds. When we see poverty and environmental degradation on a huge scale we may be quick to throw our arms up in defeat. But Christ calls us to forge ahead never giving up, for God's time will come when the wrong will be put right.

Conclusion

In the end, even in the worst of situations, hope need not be forsaken. Even in the overwhelming heartache that Rizpah endured, she found a way to maintain dignity,

hope, and victory. As we are engaged in mission, it is important to be aware of our need to work alongside people in their efforts to do the same. Even when the odds seem completely stacked against any progress or even relief of human suffering at all, then remember Rizpah and the ways God chose to work through her. Rizpah calls us never to give up or to give in to self-pity or defeat. Instead, she invites us to creatively find the ways, as James puts it, to “let endurance have its full effect so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.”

To God be all the Glory, Amen.