

Men's Night – February 2024
James 1

In ancient Roman religion and myth, Janus is the god of beginnings and gates and time and duality. The month of January is named after this fictional deity. Janus is usually depicted as having two faces, one looking to the past and one looking to the future. This Yin and Yang type of Roman god is also one who was thought to oversee conflict thus the two faces can also be war and peace. We have a special pejorative for someone who behaves one way with one group of people and another way with a different group. “That dude is two-faced”, we say. All of us here have learned to avoid friendships with double-minded individuals, namely because they can't be trusted. Equally true is the fact that none of us have been entirely consistent in our behavior. The sin of Janus is a sin that each of us could confess with some regularity.

The two faces of theater, the two masks that one associates with comedy and tragedy, have a connection to the two faces of Janus. Theatrical plot devices fascinate me. Stories are a magnificent way to convey deep truths about the human condition and the forces at work around us and the forces at work in us. One of my favorite movies is *Fiddler on the Roof*. It is a deeply Jewish movie, which began as a play, that focuses on tradition in eastern Russia and how that tradition binds the community together. Outside forces and also a new generation are to work to upset both the traditions and the unity within the community. Ultimately, the Jews face a pogrom, an organized massacre of ethnic cleansing. It is a sad movie that has great character, great universality, great insight into two opposing outlooks – maintaining tradition or bowing to change or even enacting change zealously.

Conflict stirs story telling. The seven classic genres of conflict are man vs. man, man vs. society, man vs. nature, man vs. technology, man vs. fate, man vs. the supernatural, and man vs. self. Tonight's reading from the book of James has a great deal of man vs. self. James' principal warning is against the “double-minded man” (James 1:8). What is a double-minded man? A man that has competing allegiances is the simplest answer. Jesus said that we cannot serve two masters. He said that because we very often attempt to serve two masters. In the midst of a discussion regarding treasure, man's heart, and the conflict that arises, the Lord Christ was direct. “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Matthew 6:24). God presents Himself as a jealous God in the OT. The Almighty is jealous in the sense that He is unwilling to share our hearts with idols or competitors of any sort. Like any good marriage, our relationship with God does not allow for third parties. The Lord your God has a righteous desire for you to be faithful.

It is masculine to be faithful to God. It takes strength to be faithful to God. It takes strength of a spiritual sort to not be double-minded. Fear can take one away from the promises of God and trusting in Him. Pride can take one away from the promises of God and trusting in Him. The allure of the world can take one away from the promises of God and trusting in Him. Ultimately, all of those scenarios are man vs. self. It is not outside influences that ultimately are the most dangerous snares for faith. It is the thing that is within man, the sinful nature, the doubting heart, the cowardly spirit, the desires of the flesh, the lust in man's eyes, the pride of possessions –

those are the nefarious snares to faith (1 John 2:15-17). The double-minded man is not a blessing to his neighbor and is a spiritual catastrophe waiting to happen.

Prevention; how do we prevent this sort of snare from taking us, from grabbing us round the foot and dragging us down into some dark hole? Prevention is embedded in Christ's teaching. Listen closely: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:37-39). Did you hear that? Whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. What do you suppose that means? Does it mean, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths"? (Proverbs 3:5-6). Whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. What do you suppose that means? Does it mean that looking inside yourself for answers is a vain enterprise but that looking to God and His Word is the path to wisdom, the path to strength, the path to becoming a blessing to those around you and not a walking catastrophe? Believe me, I could very easily be a walking catastrophe. So could you. Too often, I am absolutely a double-minded man. St. Paul laments the same struggle. The good that I want to do, I don't do. The evil that I don't want to do, this I keep doing (Romans 7).

I like the communion of saints. I like men's night. I like talking about what we all go through in one way or another. This is prevention. Corporately, we are strong. We are stronger together than we could ever be alone. It's true of men, it's true of congregations, it's true of nations, it's true of neighbors, it's true of church workers, it's true of soldiers, it's true of the members of Christ the King Lutheran Church. I know where I belong. I belong in Christ's church with other believers who have a singleness of purpose. I don't want to be captive to empty philosophy or human tradition or cultural nonsense. One of our principal goals is to be strong men. To that end we fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). His Father's will; Jesus had a singleness of purpose; to do His Father's will (John 6:38f.). No Janus faced Savior is He.

One of our great hymns has these two stanzas right in the middle. "God said to His beloved Son, 'It's time to have compassion. Then go, bright jewel of My crown, And bring to all salvation. From sin and sorrow set them free; Slay bitter death for them that they May live with You forever.' The Son obeyed His Father's will, Was born of virgin mother; And God's good pleasure to fulfill, He came to be my brother. His royal pow'r disguised He bore; A servant's form, like mine, He wore To lead the devil captive" (Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice – Lutheran Service Book 556). A critical verse in Luke's gospel, a verse that divides the first half of Jesus' ministry from the second half, the bloody half, Luke writes this: "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). That is the Lord I confess. That is the Savior whom you follow. He knew what He had to do to claim you for the Father. He is the antithesis is a double-minded man. He set His face to Jerusalem because He will allow nothing to get in between you and Him, between you and heaven, between you and your heavenly Father. That's who we follow. As men, as disciples, as brothers, as members of Christ the King Lutheran Church that is who we follow.