

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“The Illusion of Control”**

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*“Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil” (James 4:13-16).*

Most of us are under the illusion that we are actually in control of our lives. We like to think we’re running the show, calling the shots, and making the necessary decisions about our lives. We like to think we’re choosing our own career path, for instance, opening doors for ourselves, creating opportunities.

It’s an illusion, of course. The simple fact is that we are not in control of very much. If you doubt that, ask yourself, what did you do to be born where you were born, with the parents you had, the rights as citizens you had, with a roof over your head. The simple fact is we are not in as much control as we’d like to think we are. Step into a cab in Buenos Aires, as I did once, and tell the driver you’re sort of in a hurry to get to the airport, and he’ll teach you something theological, something about human vulnerability and mortality and lack of control.

We’re not always in the driver’s seat. We don’t have nearly as much control over things as we like to think we have, and so the illusion of control can quickly turn into the reality of chaos.

A middle-aged woman skillfully balancing the demands of her profession, marriage, and parenting, hears the physician say, “It’s malignant.” Suddenly the locus of control has shifted to the surgeon’s schedule, the chemo regimen, radiation, follow-up tests, and an unknown future.

The company is bought out, employees laid off, and a promising career ends ten years too soon.

A young couple does their best to get their finances in order before having children, and then learn they’re not going to be able to have children.

A marriage that started the way all marriages do with the highest hopes and love and laughter and passion, slowly dies and painfully ends.

The stock market falls, financial security evaporates, and early retirement is out of the question.

The simple fact is we’re not in control of very much. There are forces in the world larger than we are. Such is the lesson James teaches us today. “Now listen – you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow.”

James is not attacking long range planning here. There’s nothing unethical about planning for the future. What’s bothering James is the assumption that man can *determine* his own future without God. What’s bothering James is the assumption that

God is mostly on the sidelines, passively watching. We simply think it's God's job to fold into *our* plans. "Why, you don't even know what will happen tomorrow" James writes.

Even the needs of the day are in his hands. He taught us that already in the desert, when he prohibited his people from collecting more manna than they needed for the day. Some ignored the prohibition, and gathered more manna than they needed. By hoarding it, they were trying to take control of their own destiny, so that they didn't have to be dependent on God. God made them regret it, by engineering something into the manna to make it quickly decay and rot and stink.

It all goes back, once again, to the sin of Adam and Eve. They ate of the forbidden fruit, because they wanted to be like God. They wanted to be in control. As descendants of Adam and Eve, there's a part of us that wants to depose God and run the show ourselves. There's a part of us that wants to map out our day, our year, our lives without God. Sometimes we make plans as if we were atheists. Or, maybe we give him the token nod of acknowledgment, but then relegate him to the back seat where he's not to bother us with directions or urge us to slow down. There are still others who plan their future, *assuming* that God will approve and bless and follow our lead. Sometimes we assume it's God's job to align his will with ours, rather than the other way around.

Sound absurd to you? Think about it. Isn't that the sin of the gay movement? What scripture forbids many now say God blesses. In effect, they're grabbing hold of God by the ear, and trying to pull him in a different direction. Abortion too is an attempt to dethrone God and try to regain the locus of control. It's the same for all sin. It is removing God from office, giving him the vote of no confidence, and saying, "I'm in charge here." It always leads back to Eden, wanting to be like God, wanting to be in control. For this reason, if we get the first commandment wrong (have no other gods before me), then all the other commandments come crashing down like a house of cards. Conversely, if we get the first commandment right, if we fear, love, and trust in God above all things, then we will keep the Sabbath, and we won't hate or murder or steal, or slander, or covet . . .

James writes that instead of boasting about our plans (as if we were gods) we ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." We continue to plan, for sure, but all along we seek God's direction, we follow his guidance, we pray for his blessing, and we allow him, even invite him to swap his will in for our own.

Then James asks, "What is your life?" He doesn't mince words here. "You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." I hear that message from our oldsters all the time. Job 14, "Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He springs up like a flower and withers away; like a shadow, he does not endure." Again, from Job, "Men are like grass sprouting on the roof" and men are like "foam on the surface of the water." Can you hear the bubbles popping? And my favorite, from Job 7, "My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle." If you've ever seen a professional weave with an old loom, you know exactly what Job is talking about. That shuttle flies back and forth, clicking and clacking as it goes, ticking the days off with each pass.

The brevity of life is an important theme in the Bible, a theme that James is simply reinforcing. It's consistent with the theme that we don't have nearly as much control as we think we do. Give up the illusion then, and trust instead. We are creatures, not the creator. We are children of God, and it is wonderful being his children because

we know he loves us and is caring for us. His will for us is far better than our own will. Someone said his will is exactly what you would choose for yourself if you only knew all the details. So be content to be his treasured people, the sheep of his pasture. Don't try to depose God. Trust in him. His will for you is good and gracious.

He's already demonstrated that, right? He is almighty. He has all the power and control, and yet gave it up and became as weak and frail as an infant, and this was out of love for you. The one who could have pulled a few strings to depose Herod, Caiaphas, Pilate or the emperor himself, became subject to them instead, out of love for you. The one who could have started throwing his weight around and mock and abuse those soldiers, allowed them to do that to him, out of love for you. The one who could have called in legions of angels to his rescue him at Golgotha apparently told them to stand back and let it happen, out of love for you.

You see the irony in all this? For those of us who want to become like God, God became as us. For those who want to arrest control from God and become powerful, God gave up control and became weak in order to save.

We boast about our long range plans, but God has graciously made his own long range plans for us. Jer. 29, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (v.11).

So, people of God, don't worry about not being in control. Rejoice in being his children. When the promising career ends 10 years too soon, when the chemotherapy begins, or when the marriage ends, when the phone rings in the middle of the night, when it feels like life is simply careening out of control, "trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding." Pray that his will is done in your life, not your own, for he has good plans for you, and many of them. Amen.