

I think it is safe to assume
that all of you know
the story of the Three Little Pigs.
But do you know the story
of the Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig?
In case you don't,
let me tell you.¹



A mother wolf
gathers her 3 little wolves around her
and tells them it is time for them
to go out into the world.
But, she says, beware of the Big Bad Pig.

The three little wolves promise to be careful,
and promptly build a house of bricks
and settle in.
The next day the Big Bad Pig
sees the wolves playing croquet in the garden
and they run inside to escape him.
He wants to come in
and threatens to huff and puff
and blow down the house.
But that doesn't work
so, the Big Bad Pig gets a sledgehammer.
He wasn't the Big Bad Pig for nothing.

¹ A summary of, *The Three Little Wolves and The Big Bad Pig* by Eugene Trivizas and illustrated by Helen Oxenbury, 1993



The three little wolves only just escape
and resolve to build a stronger house
than the brick one
and start building a concrete house.
Feeling safe and secure
they start a game of badminton
and who should happen by,
but the Big Bad Pig.

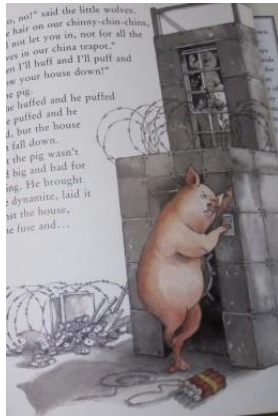
Wanting to be let in,
he threatens again
to huff and puff
but cannot blow down the concrete house.
So, the Big Bad Pig gets a jack hammer,
and the concrete house comes crashing down.



With even more resolve
the three little wolves make a plan
to build and even safer, stronger house.
They procure some armored plates,
barbed wire and plexiglass
to build their house.
They felt very safe.
So safe they play hopscotch in the garden
but wouldn't you know

the Big Bad Pig comes prowling around
and wants to come in.

So again, he threatens to huff and puff
and when that doesn't work,
the Big Bad Pig gets some dynamite
and lights the fuse near their front door.



Kaboom!!!

The three little wolves
escape with scorched tails
but are very frightened.

As they plan their next house
they wonder if their building materials
might be wrong.

And so, the next house they build
is a house of sunflowers and roses,
marigolds and cherry blossoms
—all sorts of beautiful flowers.



The house is very fragile
and sways when the wind blows,
but it was very beautiful.

The next day here comes the Big Bad Pig
asking to be let in
and threatens to huff and puff
to blow the house in.

But this time, as the Big Bad Pig takes a breath,
he smells the flowers.

And he stops.

He takes another breath.

And the fragrance of the house fills him up
and he becomes tender-hearted
and decides right then and there
to be a good pig.



He dances and makes merry.

The three little wolves watch anxiously
—can they trust this sudden transformation?
But as they watch the pig dance
they decide to invite him into their game
of wolf tag and then play piggie in middle.

The three little wolves have tea
and strawberries with the pig
and all four of them
live together happily ever after.



Now, you are likely wondering
why I took the time
to tell you this story.
Though cute,
it isn't likely that you came here this morning
to hear a children's story.

The beauty in this story
is the change the wolves make;
switching from what seems strong and secure
to something frail and beautiful
—they opt for softness heartedness and invitation
instead of fleeing and responding in fear.

This correction and change of action
can be found in our passage from James.
Martin Luther referred to this book of the New Testament
as an "*epistle of straw.*"



And of course,
one of the things I think about
when anyone mentions straw,
are the three little pigs!
In that story the pigs' house of straw

was too fragile for the huffing and puffing
of the Big Bad Wolf.

But in our children's story this morning,
something fragile, soft, and straw-like
is exactly what worked.

James gives us a lot to think about;
a dash of advice,

some Greek and Jewish cosmological affirmations
and some direct instructions
about a blossoming Christian life.

Turning back to Martin Luther's critique,
straw wasn't substantial

—it wasn't something, for Luther,
to build one's foundation of faith on.

So, in comparison

to the rock-hard foundations

that Luther found in the four gospels

and in Pauline letters like Romans,

the book of James' came up short for Luther,
wimpy and wispy on Christology.

This epistle never mentions
the death and resurrection of Christ,

which for the Luther was,

the heart of the gospel's message.²

And of course,

the emphasis on *doing things as acts of faith*

rubbed Luther too closely,

feeling and sounding

like papal indulgences.

But instead of having to have

Luther's hard-hitting strong and sturdy faith,

James offers us a reminder

that sometimes our faith

doesn't need to set up footings

² Martin Foord, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-epistle-of-straw-reflections-on-luther-and-the-epistle-of-james/>

and build something stronger
or shore up tall foundations of faith
with theological two-by-fours.

James' letter states the simple.

It harkens back to the prophet Micah,
What do the Lord require of you?

James' answer sounds like the prophet—he
wants to cultivate in us
the fruits that can come
from loving kindness
doing justice and
walking humbly.

James doesn't want to build a foundation of faith
but instead wants to grow a garden of faith.

And there is a difference,
between a foundation of faith
and a garden of faith isn't there?

James affirms light and truth and God being
the source of all good things
—using both

Greek philosophical ideals
about the highest and most ultimate being
and Jewish ethics according to religious law.³

“Every generous act of giving,
with every perfect gift,
is from above,
coming down from the Father of lights,
with whom there is no variation
or shadow due to change.” (1:17)



Grounding affirmations
in the assurance that God

³ Haruko Nawata Ward, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 4* eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Westminster John Knox, Louisville, KY 2009) pg. 14

is the source of all good things
like truth and light,
James proclaims that God birthed us,
by the word of truth
(which is his metaphor for Christ)
so that **we** would be
the *first fruits* of his creatures.
And as those first fruits,
as those who grow,
in the garden of faith,
James' letter gives advice
as to how Christians should live
for the world to flourish.

Listen to how The Message
translates the next verses,

“Post this at all the intersections, dear friends:
lead with your ears,
follow up with your tongue,
and let anger straggle along in the rear.
God’s righteousness doesn’t grow
from human anger.

So, throw all spoiled virtue
and cancerous evil
in the garbage.
In simple humility,
let our gardener, God,
landscape you with the Word,
making a salvation-garden
of your life.”⁴

Let our gardener, God,
landscape you with the Word,
making a salvation-garden of your life.
For that salvation garden of your life
to grow James is clear:

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (NavPress, Colorado Springs, Colorado 2002)
James 1:19-25

*Lead with your ears,
follow up with your tongue
and let anger straggle along in the rear.*

James sounds an awful lot like Ephesians,
*don't let anger take a hold of you,
because then you are
more likely to sin.*

And remember that song
Carol Anne taught us about
being kind to one another?

I think deep down
we know the truth James tells us:
that the slower we are to react in our anger,
the better off we are;
the more we listen,
the better off we are;
the more we think about
what we'll say before we say it,
the better off the world is.

Preacher Fred Craddock, once said,
"The Bible takes listening very seriously.
The Bible term for 'listening'
is translated most often as 'obey.'
The Bible does not know the difference
between 'listen' and 'obey.'"⁵

If we listen to the word of truth,
if we obey Christ,
we produce the fruit
of God's goodness in the world.
Listening and obeying are not passive,
they are active
and require something on our part.

⁵ Doug Bratt, https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-17b-3/?type=lectionary_epistle quoting Lee Sparks and Kathryn Hayes Sparks from *The Craft of Preaching*

It can't all be up to God.



Anyone that has a garden
knows that you can just plant the seeds
and walk away.
A garden must be tended to.
You don't get a crop yield overnight.

You have to *do things*
—like weed and water,
aerate the soil and pay attention
to sunlight and shade.
You have to be *doers*.
And if there is one thing James loves,
it's doers.

In his mind,
if you been birthed
from the fruit of Christ in this world
your calling is taking the bounty of the fruit of truth
and right-living with God and neighbor
—the definition of righteousness—
out into the world.

The fruits of goodness
that God has birthed into us
has to spill out
from our hands,
our actions,
our speech.
Again, The Message says it this way,
“don't fool yourself into thinking

that you are a listener
when you are anything but,
letting the Word go in one ear and out the other.
Act on what you hear!"

We could say, cultivate what God,
what the Holy Spirit,
has planted in you.
Develop it, nourish it,
so that its branches grow
into every aspect of your life.
Then it won't be matter
of making sure you are acting faithfully;
because your life will be a mirror,
reflecting the trust and love
that was planted and grows
in your heart.

I'd like to think
that the three little wolves change of heart—
switching from
heavy, sturdy, sharp things for building
to soft, beautiful, delicate things for building
came because they realized
that's what the Big Bad Pig needed.
The wolves recognized
that the Big Bad Pig needed something
fragile, fragrant, graceful—
to break the cycle of fear and violence.

Bricks and rocks didn't work.
But flowers and straw did.



Friends, I think the world right now,
in the midst of climate catastrophe,
wildfires,
war,
bombings,
a deadly virus,
poverty,
storms
—I think the world needs us
to be the three little wolves
in land of Big Bad Pigs.

I don't think we Christians
need to build places of strength and security.
I think James is telling us what to do.
I think the world around us
needs the beautiful and the soft
and the comforting from us.

The world needs straw
to grow their salvation gardens.
Our neighbors,
our brothers and sisters
need our listening.
Those around us need our hope.
Everyone in our lives needs grace.

Our world needs Christians
who lead with their ears,
follow with their tongue
and let anger bring up the rear.
Pure religion, James says,
is to care for the orphan and widows
in their distress.
The Message reads,
“reach out to the homeless and loveless
in their plight.”
Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

Friends, the world needs straw,

this epistle of straw—
it needs Christians
with words of assurance and love,
a promise that goodness is the foundation of the world around us.

As followers of Christ
we can be ready
with acceptance for all kinds of beauty
in order to break the cycle
of violence and fear in our world.

Straw may not be
what we use to build our houses,
but it is certainly what we need
for the garden.

Let our gardener, God, landscape you with the Word, making a salvation-
garden of your life.