

Defying Gravity: Something Bad Is Happening in Oz

James 2:1–9

As we begin our new sermon series, "Defying Gravity," we are invited into a sacred challenge: to let go of the things that weigh us down, clear away what does not serve love, and create space for holy transformation so that we may truly soar with God. This is not a one-time event. It is a continual, weekly process of letting go and opening up to God's Spirit, allowing Divine love to transform our deepest fears and brokenness.

Today, we begin by confronting one of the heaviest anchors hindering our ability to fly: **prejudice**. In our human experience, prejudice is often a learned behavior—a primal, instinctual defense mechanism designed to protect the "inner group" and maintain a false sense of safety.

We see this played out brilliantly in the musical *Wicked*. In it, we encounter Elphaba—the character history labels as the "Wicked Witch of the West." In the original *Wizard of Oz*, she is painted with a broad brush as pure evil. But *Wicked* turns the telescope around, showing us her story in a new light. Elphaba isn't evil; she is actually the one defending freedom and advocating for the rights of the Talking Animals who are being silenced and exploited by the state.

But Elphaba has a massive image problem. She was born with green skin. Because she looks different, she is immediately labeled a threat. Her own father rejects her, and that foundational rejection ripples out into a society terrified of her difference. That is exactly how prejudice operates.

[\[https://youtu.be/SHHnh5h8LqM\]](https://youtu.be/SHHnh5h8LqM)

This fear of the "other" is deeply hardwired into our survival instincts. But our faith calls us out of survival mode and into kingdom mode. God created the vast diversity of life. Divine creativity made our world intentionally complex, beautifully varied, and breathtakingly diverse. Imagine if every flower shared the exact same hue, or if every fruit bore the identical taste. We would miss out on the fullness of the Creator. Part of our spiritual maturation is learning to love others not by erasing our differences, but by recognizing our shared human unity.

This is precisely what the Book of James was trying to hammer home to the early Christian movement. James is a gritty, practical collection of teachings about how Christians are actually supposed to behave. It was written to a church in crisis—a church where discrimination and bigotry were running rampant, mirroring the toxic hierarchies of the Roman Empire rather than the values of the Kingdom of God.

James didn't care for cheap talk. He was concerned with "walking the walk." To James, faith isn't just about private piety or quiet good deeds. The church exists to engage public life. The ultimate proof of a living faith is action. Anyone can talk about Jesus, but true transformation happens when we allow God to stretch us far beyond our comfort zones.

For James, this stretch always involves standing with those who are pushed to the margins of society: the economically poor, the oppressed, the sick, the orphan, and the widow. A sign of true faith is the refusal to show partiality—to offer no special treatment to the rich, the powerful, or the well-connected.

James points us back to the "royal law": *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* We love to put boundaries around who counts as a neighbor, don't we? But remember how Jesus answered that question. He told a story about a Samaritan—the cultural enemy, the ultimate "other" who fulfilled the law of love while the religious elite walked right past a dying stranger. Jesus shattered human barriers to redefine who belongs.

Let us listen to how sharply James addresses this in **James 2:1–9**:

"My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please,' while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there,' or, 'Sit at my feet,' have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors."

We will never fully understand every person on earth; our cultures, backgrounds, and experiences are beautifully vast. But what holds us together in unity is infinitely deeper than anything that divides us. The Spirit of the Creator is woven into the very fabric of who we are.

At its core, *Wicked* is a story about an unlikely friendship that transcends instinctual fear. At the end of the first act, Elphaba realizes she can no longer live within the small, fearful, and corrupt rules of Oz. She sings these powerful words:

“Something has changed within me, something is not the same. I’m through with playing by the rules of someone else’s game. Too late for second-guessing, too late to go back to sleep. It’s time to trust my instincts, close my eyes and leap.”

And then, she flies.

Today, you and I are being invited to defy the gravity of our world. We are invited to fly with Christ into the wide-open spaces of radical love and grace, free from the heavy anchors of prejudice and fear. Let us let go of the baggage holding us down. It's time to close our eyes, trust God, and leap.

Let us prepare our hearts to respond to God's word as we enter a time of guided prayer.

I invite you to close your eyes, if you are comfortable doing so. Take a deep, intentional breath. Feel the weight of your body pressing into your seat. Acknowledge the gravity pulling at you - the worries of the past week, the heavy labels the world places on you, the fears that keep you anchored to the ground.

Take another deep breath, and as you exhale, consciously drop your shoulders. Let go of the tension.

Imagine yourself standing at the edge of a high, open cliff. Below you are the old rules, the old fears, the expectations, and the barriers that keep your world small. But before you is a vast, open sky, illuminated by the bright, warm light of God's unconditional grace.

Feel the wind of the Holy Spirit beginning to stir around you. It is gentle, yet incredibly powerful.

Now, look down at your hands. What are you holding onto that is too heavy to carry into the sky? Is it prejudice? Is it fear of the other? Is it a need for control? Whatever that heavy anchor is for you today... picture yourself simply opening your hands and letting it fall away. Watch it drop into the canyon below. You don't need it where you are going.

You are lighter now. The wind of the Spirit is rising beneath you.

Hear Christ whispering to your soul: *“Do not be afraid. Trust me. Leap.”*

With an inner sigh of relief, picture yourself taking that step off the edge. You are no longer bound by the gravity of fear. You are caught by the updraft of Divine love. Feel the exhilarating sensation of lifting off. Your spirit is soaring, rising higher and higher, above the divisions, above the judgments, and into the pure, limitless freedom of God's grace. *Closer to God. Closer to who you were created to be.* Feel the freedom of your new flight.

Let us pray: Holy God, Creator of the wind and the stars, thank you for calling us out of our comfort zones and into the skies. Every day, the gravity of this world tries to pull us back down into fear, judgment, and isolation. But by your Spirit, we choose to fly. Give us the courage each week to drop our heavy baggage at your feet, to trust your instinct of love within us, and to defy gravity alongside Christ. Keep us soaring in your grace, that we might see the world from your perspective. In the beautiful, liberating name of Jesus, we pray. **Amen.**