

## Be Patient

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers  
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,  
on Sunday, December 15, 2019.

James 5:7-10  
Matthew 11:2-11

It has long been said that patience is a virtue. We generally admire people who exhibit patience. "She's so patient with that child," we might say. Or "he has the patience of Job," which makes reference to the biblical character who remained faithful to God in spite of the terrible tragedies, trials, and tribulations that plagued his life.

Patience -- "the capacity to accept or tolerate delay, trouble, or suffering without getting angry or upset" -- may be a virtue, but it is not a virtue that is nurtured very much in our fast-paced U.S. culture. It is becoming a rarer commodity. We don't really like to wait for anything. We eat fast food. We communicate instantaneously with friends and family through various forms of instant messaging. We entertain ourselves using streaming services that provide content on demand. And we can travel thousands of miles in a matter of hours.

Perhaps the reason we admire patience so much in others is that we know from experience how difficult it can be to be patient ourselves. Most of us struggle with it from time to time. I know I do.

My patience wears thin when I'm trying to make a left turn at rush hour and the cars just keep coming, spaced just far enough apart that there is no opportunity to make my turn without risking an accident. Or you should see me when I make a phone call and navigate a series of automated multiple-choice questions, only to be placed on hold to listen to Muzak for half an hour, interrupted every few minutes by the recorded announcement: "Thank you for holding. All of our operators are assisting other callers. Your call is important to us. Please continue to hold and an operator will be with you shortly." I don't want to keep holding, but if I hang up I'll lose my place in the cue. God help the unsuspecting operator in the call center who finally takes my call. It takes every ounce of emotional strength for me to stay calm and try to get my questions answered rather than exploding in a counterproductive fit of rage.

In this morning's reading from Matthew it sounds to me like John the Baptist is beginning to grow a little impatient with Jesus. John had prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One. And when Jesus came along, John was sure that he was the One. But now, as John languished in Herod's prison, he was having some doubts.

He wasn't so sure about Jesus. Reports about what Jesus was doing had gotten back to him: Jesus was teaching in the synagogues, preaching the good news of the coming reign of God, and healing people of their diseases and infirmities. It was all well and good what Jesus was doing, but it was not at all what John had been expecting. John had expected the Messiah to be the new King of Israel in the family line of David, which meant that Herod would be ousted from power. John had expected the Messiah to save God's people from oppression, to liberate them from Roman occupation. He had

expected the Messiah to carry out the final judgment, to lay the ax at the root of the trees and to see that every tree that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. But Herod was still in power, and John was still in prison. Not much had changed it seemed. If Jesus was the Messiah, he was turning out to be a very different kind of Messiah from what John had expected.

John may speak for those in the church today who were once sure of their faith but now are not so sure, those who have begun to wonder whether Jesus' way of love and compassion can ever really work in a world of violence and injustice, where economic and political elites hold most of the power. Is there really a God who is watching us, who knows and cares about what is going on in the world? Does God have a plan? Is God ultimately in charge? And if so, is Jesus the definitive revelation of that God, or should we look elsewhere for answers to our ultimate questions? If you've ever asked such questions, if you have some doubts, you are in good company. John was having his own doubts about Jesus, and he was Jesus' contemporary. He knew Jesus personally, in the flesh.

Well, somehow, John is able to get a message to his disciples to go to Jesus and ask him straight out: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus responds, but he doesn't give a simple yes or no answer. Jesus doesn't say, "Yes, go and tell John that I am the One, I am the Messiah. You need look no further." No, instead, he urges John's disciples to look and listen, to see and hear what is going on in the world around them and to report their observations back to John. "Go and tell John what you hear and see," Jesus says, "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." Here Jesus is almost quoting from Isaiah 35: "the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; . . . the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." Jesus is pointing out that people's lives are being transformed, God's kingdom is breaking in, and the world is being changed forever.

Just as Jesus urges John's disciples, Jesus urges us "to look and listen, to see and hear what is going on in the world around" us, to witness those places where God's kingdom is breaking in. We see God's active presence where there is healing in people's lives. We see God at work where we see acts of justice and mercy, where the marginalized and disenfranchised are empowered, and where conflicts are managed and resolved before they escalate into violence. Herod may still be in the palace and in the headlines, and John may still be in prison, but Jesus is doing a new thing in the world, under the radar, working in ways that don't often make the news.

Now, turning to the scripture reading from James, he was writing to an audience that was also growing impatient. Following Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the early Christians expected Jesus to return almost immediately. But a few decades had passed and Jesus had not yet returned. So, James counsels patience. "Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord."

Note the word "therefore." It points us to what comes immediately before this passage: a warning to the rich about the judgment that will come upon them as a result of their mistreatment of others: "Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. . . . Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields,

which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.”

Then James shifts to speaking to his own community, who we might say are part of the 99%. “Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.” Here James is not suggesting that those who are poor and oppressed passively acquiescence to the situations they find themselves in. On the contrary, they are to be patient in the same way that a farmer is patient, cultivating the soil, planting seeds, weeding, controlling pests, actively doing everything possible to ensure a good crop, while waiting on God to do the rest – to bring the early and late rains and to bring the plants to maturity, to the point that they can be harvested.

As Augustine of Hippo, the fourth-century theologian, once put it: “pray as if everything depends on God, and work as if everything depends on you,” for “God without us will not, as we without God cannot.” For James waiting patiently on God in prayer and taking action ourselves are two sides of the same coin.

To whom does James say we should look for examples of suffering and patience? The prophets, who were anything but passive. “As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.” The prophets were social reformers who warned of God's judgment and who urged repentance. They were both social critics, condemning systems and structures of oppression and injustice, and social visionaries, offering hope for the future.

I have to admit that I have grown impatient with our government – with the current administration and with Congress. Maybe some of you have as well. I have grown weary of the impeachment proceedings and the deep partisan divide between Republicans and Democrats in our government and in our country. I fear for the future of our Republic.

As I was reading biblical commentaries this week, I ran across one commentary on James (written years ago) that said this: “Until the Lord comes, oppression by the rich and powerful will continue. In such circumstances, it would be natural for people to turn on each other. In fact, oppression typically fosters such internal divisions among those under stress. James, therefore, forbids them to ‘grumble against one another.’ Like the people of Israel oppressed in Egypt, their ‘complaint’ should be turned to the Lord, who can hear them, and not turned against each other. If they turn such grumbling against each other, the community itself will become a realm of competition rather than cooperation.”

Isn't that where we are today, I thought? We are a nation that has been divided along lines of race, class, and ideology, reduced to grumbling against each other instead of working together -- collectively, constructively -- for the common good.

James is speaking to us! “Be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.”

The prophets exhibited what might be called revolutionary patience. They did everything they could to challenge the injustices and idolatries of their day, urging the people to return to God's ways and God's righteousness. And they prayed for God to do the rest.

Feel like grumbling about the state of our nation, about the state of the world? Be patient. Take it to the Lord in prayer. And lest you think that prayer is a too weak a response to the enormous challenges we face, remember the words of Karl Barth. Barth was the 20<sup>th</sup>-century theologian who rejected the influence of Nazism on German Christianity and helped spark the Confessing Church movement to resist Hitler. He knew the power of prayer. "To clasp hands in prayer," he said, "is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world."

May it be so. Amen.