

“Perfect Patience”

“Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand” (James 5:7-8).

According to Reference.com, Americans spend 13 hours every year waiting on hold for customer service. And the average commuter in our country spends 38 hours each year waiting in traffic. And Americans spend 37 billion hours each year waiting in line. And, in addition to these annual totals, we also wait an average of 32 minutes when we visit a doctor, and we spend 28 minutes waiting in security lines when we fly. And, if these public challenges to patience aren't enough, Americans also wait 21 minutes for a spouse to get ready to go out. And I won't tell you what that looks like in my house. Waiting is a frustrating fact of life, and it seems like the longer we have to wait, the easier it is for us to lose our patience. It is always difficult to wait, but when the circumstances are out of our control, waiting can create anxiety and cloud our judgment, even when we should know better.

In today's reading from Matthew, we see this impact of impatience in one of the most important characters in the Bible. John the Baptist, the one about whom Jesus said, “among those born of women there has arisen no one greater”; John the Baptist, the prophet who prepared the way for the Christ and proclaimed with boldness that the “Kingdom of Heaven” was near; John the Baptist, the hero of Advent, now finds himself waiting in Herod's prison, and the same demons that attack us as we wait, also plagued John. Anxiously waiting and confused by his plight, John sends some of his followers to ask Jesus if He was indeed “the one who is to come.” There's no veiled meaning or hidden agenda in John's question. As he waited in his prison cell John wanted to know from Jesus, “Are you the Christ? Are you the Messiah? Are you the Savior promised throughout the Old Testament? Are you the One we've waited for – or did we get it wrong?” As John contemplated his fate and coped with the wait, he questioned the very purpose for which he was born and, in his impatience, John lost sight of God's promises. Anxious impatience had clouded his eyes and, even for John the Baptist, doubt had taken root.

And today, this story is so important for us to hear, because this is something we understand all-too well. We hate to wait. And whether it's waiting on our kids to get ready for church, or waiting for the doctor to call with test results, the anxiety of impatience can drive us to distraction. And like John the Baptist, the concern and confusion of our sinful hearts can blind us to God's promises and to the people we are called to serve.

I once read a Jewish folk tale which featured Father Abraham who was sitting outside his tent one night when he saw an old, weary traveler coming toward him. Abraham rushed out to greet the man, and immediately invited him in. Once they were inside the tent, Abraham gently washed the old man's feet and graciously gave him food and drink. But without saying any kind of prayer or blessing, the old man quickly began eating. The man's apparent lack of gratitude shocked Abraham and he asked the old man, “Don't you worship God?”

The old traveler replied that he worshipped fire only and gave reverence to no other god. When Abraham heard this, he became furious. He grabbed the old man by the shoulders and threw him out of his tent into the cold night air. After the old man had departed, God called to his friend

Abraham and asked where the stranger was. Abraham replied proudly, “I kicked him out of my tent because he did not worship you.” And to Abraham’s indignant reply God answered, “I have suffered him these eighty years although he dishonors me. Could you not endure him one night?”

This convicting fable cuts right to the heart, because just like we see in this fictional tale of Abraham, our prideful impatience blinds us from the good things God is doing in and through our lives. James writes, “Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient” (James 5:7-8).

This word of God is crystal clear, and yet we struggle, and ultimately, we fail to follow this divine command. We are called to bear with one another other in love, yet we quickly write off those who don’t follow our advice. We complain about those we think have treated us with disrespect, yet we are quick to speak about those same people behind their backs. We justify our own failings, yet are all too eager to point out the flaws of others. We explain how we have been wrongly judged, while at the same time jumping to unfounded conclusions about our neighbor. If God treated us with even a small measure of our own impatience, we wouldn’t stand a chance.

But that’s not how God has treated us. Instead of punishment, we have seen patience. Instead of condemnation, we experienced compassion. Instead of judgment, we have received joy. And instead of death, we have been given life. Peter writes, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” And the Apostle Paul proclaims that, “at just the right time when we were still powerless Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6). This means that for our sinful and selfish hearts, Christ died. This means that for our anxious and confused priorities, Christ died. And this means that for our willful impenitence and blatant impatience, Jesus Christ died, and for His sake, you are forgiven.

We have failed to be patient, and in our impatience, we have tried to force God to meet our demands in our way and on our schedule. But God’s timing is impeccable, and His patience is persistent, and because of God’s perfect patience we have been freed from the power of sin. And just as God’s forgiveness gives us the power to forgive others, God’s longsuffering love enables us to be patient with others, so that through our witness, the Gospel may be proclaimed and the Holy Spirit may bring to faith and salvation those for whom Christ died...even when it doesn’t look like we think it should look, and even when it doesn’t fit into our plan or go according to our schedule.

I know that today some of you are struggling as you wait for a call from a prospective employer, or for the results of a medical test, or for your heart to heal, or your anger to subside, or as you wait for some other issue or event to unfold in your life. And waiting can be confusing and cause all kinds of anxiety. But God has never and will never give up on you, and just as He did for John the Baptist, today God reminds you that through Christ you can endure the uncertainties of this life with confidence in God’s promise that He will save you and He will use you – even in your weakness...and even as you wait – to accomplish His saving purpose. Brothers and sisters in Christ, you can wait with established hearts, because the Lord’s coming is near and His patience is perfect. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold