

sermon-12/12/10 Newport Pres. Church
“Patience”
James 5:7-10

Here we are at the third Sunday of Advent. We can almost feel the warm glow our Christmas Eve candlelight services create. We want to hear the familiar passages out of the Gospels about Jesus’ birth. And what does the lectionary give us? James of all books!

James is a very strange book. It almost did not make it in the canon. Martin Luther hated James. He called it an epistle of straw. One commentator I read said that among all the letters in the New Testament, some have called James the junk mail of the New Testament. It has bothered people because it seems to be very short on any affirmation of grace. It hardly mentions Jesus’ life or death. One scholar expressed shock that when James picked examples of those showing patient endurance in our passage, he did not mention Jesus and his suffering on the cross.

Still, James is what we are given. It does make some sense. Advent is about waiting and preparing for Christ to come. Our James passage is about patiently waiting for Christ to come again. This reminds us Advent has a two-fold emphasis. We prepare and wait for the Christmas celebration, for God to be born among us as God was born in that stable long ago. This waiting encourages us to hold off Christmas joy until we have done the hard work of preparation.

We also prepare and wait in Advent for what some have called the Second Coming of Christ. We wait for our world to finally experience the hopes and dreams unleashed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus long ago. We wait for the kingdom of God to finally be realized in our lives and in our world. Some say that will only happen if Christ comes again to set things right.

Waiting requires patience. Patience is a virtue. If we are honest, it is something we admire in others but don’t want to learn ourselves. It is not easy to wait patiently. Anyone who has waited on I-405 in traffic when you want to get somewhere important and you are late knows this. Anyone who has had to wait for test results that might have ominous consequences for our life or the life of one we love knows this. Anyone who longs for an end to wars where so many of our young men and women are being killed or maimed knows this.

Waiting for something we deeply care about reminds us part of life is out of our control. The control freaks among us hate that. But even if we are not a control freak, we feel very vulnerable when we realize much of what happens to us and those we love cannot be controlled no matter how hard we try. We can raise our children just right and they may still make wrong decisions. We can take care of our bodies, eating right and getting exercise, and still get sick.

James takes on this control issue in chapter five. He rails against the rich in the few verses before our text. These rich are the powerful ones who oppress others for their own wealth. These are the ones who think their money and power mean they can control their destiny. They think they can insulate themselves from life’s hardships if only they are powerful or rich enough to be in control.

Those rich may have lived in luxury, but they have not learned how to wait patiently for that which is beyond their control. They have not learned how to wait for God's presence to surprise them in the midst of their days. Who needs God if you think you can give yourself what your heart desires?

In contrast to the rich and powerful are the poor ones. These are the ones James addressed in this letter. These are the ones who made up the bulk of worship going Christians in his day. These poor ones could also miss God if they don't strengthen their hearts and learn patient endurance.

James says they need to follow the example of the farmers. These farmers plant their crop, but then it is pretty much out of their control. They depend on the early and the late rains. They can't rush things. Often poor farmers in that day suffered greatly between the planting and the harvesting. They may have gone hungry. They needed to face this inevitable suffering with patience.

In the same way the prophets needed to be patient. They could be impatient with injustice, so to speak, but they could only do what they could do and then they had to patiently endure the consequences of their speaking out. They could control what they said, but they could not control whether or not people changed because of their message. They could not control those who opposed them and persecuted them.

One commentator said if we are clear on what we can control and what we can't then we have a strong basis from which to wait patiently. If we confuse what we can control and what we can't then we are in danger of grumbling and pointing fingers at each other. James warned his readers about this. Don't let your suffering make you impatient and cause you to treat your fellow Christians poorly.

James even introduces the notion of judgment. He says if they judge one another in their grumbling they need to remember they will be judged. The judge is right at the door. This whole notion of judgment is a new twist on Advent waiting. We long for God to come again into our world, into our hearts. But, the God who comes in peace is the One who judges as well. The only good news in all of this is that, as James says in verse eleven, God is compassionate and merciful. The One who judges is also the one who loves us beyond measure.

This passage in James is very relevant for our day. We need no convincing about how tough things are in our world. It is tough economically speaking. It is tough for many in terms of their health or the health of one they love. It is a tough time politically where grumbling and finger pointing have reached an art form while the country suffers.

We long for God's Kingdom to break out. We long for God to set things right. It is tempting to long for a literal second coming. Let Christ come and judge all those who are causing harm. The trick is for us to be patient in waiting, but not resigned to injustice at the same time. There is a terrible tension in that stance. We need to work for justice while not working in such a way we fool ourselves about our power to change things. St. Ignatius of Loyola put it this way: "We pray as if everything depended on God, and . . . work as if everything depended on us." That is a tough tension in which to live.

E.B. White put it a little differently. He said, "I wake up in the morning torn between the desire to enjoy the world and to improve the world. That makes it difficult to plan the day." In Advent we plan the day remembering to be patient when things don't go our way.

Many of us are not looking for a literal Second Coming of Christ. But, that does not mean these words in James about the Lord coming soon are meaningless. We do long to experience God's presence coming each and every day into our lives. That can be a subtle form of the Second Coming.

Cynthia Campbell, the President of McCormick, the Presbyterian seminary in Chicago, says Advent is a "time when the Church chooses to keep alive the hope that God is not finished with creation or with human history." Campbell affirms God is active in our lives bringing about what God has always intended for this world.

If we believe that, we will do what we can to help and then wait patiently. Graham Cook, in a British handbook of prayer says we have some explaining to do when we claim Christ is coming in Advent. Suppose some ask us where is your Christ? He writes, "What are we going to do to justify our claim that he is on his way? Singing carols with mince pies afterwards is not enough." To that I can only say, Amen.