

Pastor Joe Polzin
James 5:7-11
“Patience in Suffering”
Year A – Third Sunday in Advent
December 15, 2019

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Patience is indeed a virtue. How does the prayer go? “Lord, grant me patience... and hurry!” But patience can actually be a hard thing to come by. When Jennie and I were expecting our first child, the advice my parents gave me was to be more patient. They said it was always something they tried to have more of. And I thought to myself, “Well, I’m a pretty patient guy, I should be able to handle this.” And then I had kids. And I understood what they meant. As a parent, it’s very easy to lose your patience. To get so caught up in the frustration of the moment and make a rash decision, and then you look back and think to yourself, “Why wasn’t I more patient?”

Well, we’re currently in a time of the year that both *inspires* and *requires* a lot of patience. Children can hardly wait for Christmas break, and all the festivities that come with the holiday. We all have to patiently tend to the extra shopping and the card-writing and the gift-giving. We patiently endure the longer lines at the post office or the store, the extra cooking and preparations that need to be done, and even the winter weather. Sometimes, we do *well* at being patient. Other times, we *don’t*.

Do you know what patience really is? Here’s my definition, this is what we’re going to be talking about today: patience is looking forward to a future reality in such a way that it shapes and directs your present. Let me say that again, patience is looking forward to a future reality in such a way that it shapes and directs your present. Patience allows you to look past the demands and the frustrations today because you’re looking towards something greater that’s to come.

As a parent, the future we envision for our children is that they would become mature, healthy, self-sufficient Christian individuals. And looking forward to that day shapes and directs the present day. Not only will considering the future help us make choices about how we want to raise our children, but we’re also able to endure many more of the difficulties that raising a family brings. Conversely, however, when we get so overwhelmed by the demands of the present, we may lose sight of what we’re working towards and that’s when we lose our patience. We may even get frustrated that things aren’t different right now, wanting the future to come more quickly than it is.

The same is true at Christmas, isn’t it? Looking forward to our future of family time, and fun, and a good celebration of our Savior’s birth helps shape and direct the things we do in the present. We’re able to be patient with all the busyness that this season brings. But again, when we get overwhelmed by the demands of the present, we may lose sight of that future, and lose our patience. Some people even get the point where they just can’t wait for the holidays to be over, so that everything can get back to normal.

Well, this idea that patience is looking toward a future reality that shapes and directs our present is exactly what we hear in our Epistle Reading today from James chapter 5. James writes, “Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord.” You see, James isn’t telling us that we should be more patient because that’s the nice Christian thing to do. He’s saying the

entire Christian life is shaped and directed by the future day we know is coming, specifically, the arrival of our Lord.

And that's why we're talking about this in Advent. Advent is the time we recognize that not only are we waiting for our Savior's birth at Christmas, but we are also waiting for his Second Advent on the Last Day. The day when he will return, and raise us from the dead, and make all things right, taking away our sin, our death, and our suffering. That is our future, and we will be overjoyed on that day. We can't even fathom how wonderful it will all be.

And James is saying, keep your eyes fixed on this future day, when Christ returns again. And this will begin to shape and direct how you live in the present. James gives the example of the farmer, who waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it. Being a farmer is hard work. And it requires patience. A farmer spends a long time taking care of the ground and the crop before he receives any of the fruit of his labor. But because the farmer knows what is coming at the end of the season, he can endure the difficulties of the present, and it makes all his work worth it. This is like our Christian life. We are people who patiently live in light of the coming Advent of our Lord.

But we don't always live patiently, do we? No, too often we lose sight of our future reality with God, and instead find ourselves living captive to the moment. We grow impatient. And we do this because we are sinful, and as James says, because in this life we have to endure suffering.

It's hard to be patient when we're suffering. Sin has taken its toll on this world and in our lives. And so, we have to suffer conflict and pain, broken relationships and other people's selfishness, persecution and hardships, sinful actions of others and of our own doing. We have to suffer diagnoses and disease and eventually death. Sin and evil means that in this life, to live is to suffer. No wonder we're tempted to lose our patience. We shouldn't, but we do. We should know full well what our future reality is and keep our eyes fixed on that. But suffering distracts us, and causes us to take our eyes off the future, and we become fixated on the present. And as sinners, we grow more and more impatient.

The world is lost in impatience. We want things fixed now, instead of patiently waiting for the perfect healing and restoration that will come when Christ will return. And so we grumble. Against one another and even against God. We don't have time to wait, and so we go seeking after any remedy, any fix, anything that promises us relief from suffering, whether it's inappropriately putting all our hope in doctors, or alcohol, or drugs, or relationships, or whatever it may be that can put a temporary bandage on the suffering. But the longer we stay focused on the present, trying to fix things now, the more we lose sight of our future with God, and the more we lose our patience.

That's what was happening in our Gospel Reading today with John the Baptist. John was the great and fiery preacher who had prepared the way for Jesus. Except now he was sitting in prison. And he was losing his patience. He had been waiting for the one who was going to baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire," who with "winnowing fork in his hand" would "clear his threshing floor" and burn the chaff "with unquenchable fire" (Matt. 3:11-12).

But then John was thrown in prison for doing what God had asked him to do, and he was left to suffer and await a humiliating death. John was losing sight of the promised future, and he could only focus on the moment. And so, he sent word to Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (11:3) You can almost hear his readiness to admit defeat.

But that's when Jesus restores John's hope. He tells John's disciples, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and

the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them” (11:4-5). In other words, the signs that can only be associated with the arrival of God himself are happening now, in me, Jesus says. The sin and the suffering that has caused this world to lose patience is being stopped in its tracks and reversed. I am the one you have been waiting for. I have come to bring you hope and healing, even in the midst of your suffering.

And then Jesus himself, as an example to us of God’s own patient suffering, would go to the cross to offer himself for all the times we fail to be patient with him. All the times God’s people have grumbled against him. All the times God’s people didn’t act as God’s people here on earth because they lost their patience and tried to take things into their own hands. Jesus took these sins and all our sins with him to the cross. And he suffered. And he died.

But then he rose again. He rose again to assure us that the future we are waiting for is not a judgment against us for all our sins. It’s not suffering and then eternal death. No, it’s life and healing and restoration, both physically and spiritually. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:25-26). We may suffer and die for a patient moment, but when Jesus comes back, he will raise us from the dead, ending all our sin and suffering and death, once and for all, and we will live forever with him.

James writes, “As an example of suffering and patience brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we considered those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.” Did you catch that? Consider people like the prophets, like John the Baptist, and like Job, who truly suffered in this lifetime. But the Lord revealed to them a purpose, a certain future reality that shaped and directed their present, no matter what kind of suffering was going on around them. A future day that gave them hope. Something that showed them the Lord is truly both compassionate and merciful.

And we know what future they were shown, because it’s our future as well. It’s the Advent of Jesus. It’s the day when Jesus will come again. It’s the day we keep our eyes fixed on, even in the midst of our present suffering. It’s what gives us faith and hope. It’s the assurance that God is both compassionate and merciful to us, as well. So that we don’t have to live captive to the ups and downs of the present, losing our patience. But rather so that we can live patiently in light of all that God has done and will do for us.

When we live in the light of this future reality, that the Lord is at hand, he establishes our hearts and makes them patient. We have no need to grumble against one another. We have patience with one another. Because our hope isn’t in this moment. It’s in the future. We can bear a lot of things in light of what we know is joyfully coming in the day to come. And we can also have patience with God. We may not know why things are happening the way they do, but we can be certain of this: Jesus came the first time to live, to die, and to rise again so that we would never die. And Jesus is coming again so that whatever suffering we may endure presently, it won’t even compare to the life, restoration, peace, comfort, and joy that is coming.

This Advent season, this Christmas, may you be given patience. Not a burden of patience, a constant reminder that you should act more patiently. But a Godly patience, that comes by faith in Jesus. That as a Christian, you know you are patiently waiting for your Lord, who is compassionately and mercifully coming soon for you. In Jesus’ name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**