

Isaiah 40:27-31
James 1:2-10, 16-18
Text: Isaiah 40:31

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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PATIENCE, AND A VISION OF GOD

Hardly a day goes by for any of us when we didn't wish that someone would move a little faster, work a little harder, think like we do, or exercise our own good judgment. The need for patience impacts us all. And while the rewards of our patience may never be known to us, the disruption, even violence that our impatience inflicts can be immediate, very public, and irreversible.

Impatience comes from a deep frustration that our personal expectations are not being met. There are differences in views about how to accomplish a task; differences in belief, in the use of time, and so on.

Leonard Hodgson in his book, *Essays in Christian Philosophy* writes of a man who prayed earnestly one morning for grace to overcome his besetting sin of impatience. A little later he missed a train by half a minute and spent an hour stamping up and down the station platform in furious vexation. Five minutes before the next train came he realized that there had been the answer to his prayer. God had given him an hour to practice the virtue of patience, and he had wasted the hour. The story also comes to mind of the wealthy woman who prayed for the gift of patience, and the Lord sent her a bad cook.

The ever earthy and worldly-wise Martin Luther compared the patience and persistence that is needed to negotiate the Christian life to the problem of putting a drunk on a horse. You manage to hoist him up on one side and he falls down the other. And given the horses, metaphorically speaking, that some of us must ride through life, that takes real perseverance and patience.

God seldom delivers virtues all wrapped up in a package ready for us to use. We learn patience by being patient, in the same way that we learn to be a good parent by parenting, or to be a teacher by teaching. Ironically, it is on the lips of the cynical Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello* that we are reminded:

“How poor are they that have not patience,
What wound did ever heal but by degrees.”

Our impatience springs so frequently from our being focused on our own agenda. You recall the prayers that we often pray for the resolution of some problem. Then we go about our own plans anyway, as though God should respond faster than E-mail. Yet God's own timing is perfect, it just doesn't appear so until our own efforts evaporate, and a superior agenda discretely slips in.

Our text today from Isaiah gives a picture of God worth contemplating. “They who wait for the Lord,” while all about are feinting with exhaustion, “shall renew their strength.”

In Doris Kearns Goodwin's splendid study of Lincoln's Civil War years, we meet a gangly backwoods lawyer who, at the outset, seems a surprise to be U.S. Congressman. An almost cartoonish figure, scurrying around rural Illinois in the wake of the circuit court judge, eking a living from the flotsam of humanity that sought their ounce of justice, while local folk crammed the courthouse for the best entertainment of the year likely. As William Banowsky summarized, “He failed in business in 1831, was defeated for State legislator in 1832, failed again in business in 1833, was elected to the state legislature in 1834. His sweetheart died in 1835 and he had a nervous breakdown in 1836. He was defeated for speaker of the state legislature in 1838, defeated for elector in 1840, and defeated for U.S. Congress in 1843. Finally he was elected for one term in congress in 1846, only to be defeated again for congress in 1848. He was defeated for Senate in 1855, was defeated for Vice President in 1856, and was defeated again for Senate in 1858. Finally, in 1860, still as a relative unknown, and

with the Republican party emerging from the ashes of regional infighting over slavery, he virtually backed into the presidency. He is still, by many presidential historians' consensus, the finest President we have ever had.

Jesus had that determination. He determined to go to Jerusalem to meet his accusers, and his death, but not before his time had come. And he was aware that the time would come when God gave him the conviction that the time was right. Patience brings a vision of what God would lead us to do.

You've heard me say before—yet I'm so impressed with the power of it that I want to share it again—that when I find myself in a difficult situation, the sort that hits us all from time to time, facing someone who is overcome by stress, or conviction, someone, perhaps, who clings to their agenda because they can't bear to relinquish more territory. When the blood can be seen rising in their face, their anger perched on the lip of frustration—offer this silent prayer: “Lord, be in the midst of this thing, calm this moment and bring it your peace.” It should not be a prayer to have God take sides—“Lord help this Neanderthal see it my way!” But pray for peace and clarity. Pray for the impact of God. Pray inwardly. And watch a calm drift into the other's spirit, as though they were arrested from outside themselves; as though a veil were lifted and the spirit softens. It is remarkable. It is the imprint of our faithful God at that very instant. Not to win *us* the day—but to win the day.

Oswald Chambers said, “A saint's life in the hands of God is like an arrow in the hands of an archer. God is aiming at something that the saint cannot see, and he stretches and strains, and every now and again the saint says, ‘I cannot stand anymore.’ [But] God does not heed. He goes on stretching till his purpose is in sight, then he lets fly.” So the secret is to trust ourselves in God's hands.

Jesus expects us to struggle, and to hold to our faith in suffering. He calls these pains birth pains, so that what seems a hindrance becomes itself a way, what seems an obstacle becomes a door; what seems an agony becomes a redemptive moment. That's what patience means. It comes from the Latin word *patior* which means “to suffer.” It's where the noun “patient” comes from, as one who suffers through some infirmity, but more importantly—who works through to a point of healing.

Patience, then, is never asked of us by God in terms of blind endurance. It's always linked to a vision. It's not just, “Hang on, things will get better.” It isn't the stoic resolve of one who says “C'est la vie.” True patience is always linked to a vision of God, to a desire to be faithful and true to a greater cause. The goal of the arrow is to find its mark.

In 1881, the College of William and Mary, in Virginia, closed its doors for nearly seven years. The ravages of the Civil War had left the college physically in ruins. But every morning during those seven years President Ewell rang the chapel bell. There were no students; the faculty had long since departed; rain seeped through the shell-shocked roofs of the desolate buildings. But President Ewell still rang the bell—every morning, because the bell was there to summons people to their labors, to their civic duty; to hope and prospect, and to rekindle the belief that a good thing must never die. His persistence finally won out.

The Lord is the one who turns impossible situations around. Not, to be sure, the one who turns things around to meet our own agendas, but who turns things around such that we say, “I would never have thought of that, I would never have dreamed that could be a solution.” To have patience is to have a vision of God. The power to endure is there because you see God in your future.

Patience is the very act of pushing aside our own priorities in order to struggle to see another way, another's point of view. There can be very few moments in life that would not benefit from an extra moment's thought, a bridling of the tongue, a searching, listening ear, a silent prayer instead of a vented frustration. Few can be the moments that benefit what we heap upon them when we lose patience, and how different they might be if our vision of God allowed us to transform the moment into something good.

I recall, for example, a harried mother leaving the grocery store in Pensacola a few years ago, three children in tow, and a cart piled high with grocery bags. One child grasped each of her hands somewhat reluctantly, while the third pirouetted on the sidewalk with a toy in hand. Then, quite without warning he ran into the access lane and a red Camarro hit his breaks furiously.

The child stopped, panicked by the sound. The mother screamed and fled after him, and right as she reached him you could see her hand raised in anger but then, in a flurry, it came down and in midst of all the stalled traffic both arms shot around his small body to hold him still, and lovingly.

A momentary vision of what God wills us to be. How stealing patience from the anger of the moment can transform a moment.

Amen.