

The PATIENCE OF OUR LORD

Isaiah 40: 1-11

2 Peter 3: 8-15a

Mark 1: 1-8

[Second Sunday in Advent, 5 December 1999, First Lutheran Church, Attica, Indiana]

Patience is a virtue, they say. To be quite honest, I'm not sure I know many patient people. How about you? I wonder why it is that we have such a difficult time being patient? Perhaps there are some hints in our scriptural lessons from this morning.

The story of John the Baptist has always puzzled me. This poor guy goes out to prepare the way; his is the voice of one crying in the wilderness. He preaches repentance, wears some really uncomfortable clothes, baptizes in the river Jordan, and proclaims that he is simply the set-up man for the one who is more powerful than me, the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. And in the end, of course, we may recall that John loses his head. Is that the reward for patience, for not tooting your own horn, for serving the one who is to come? What kind of virtue is patience if this is what it leads to?

And what about the words of Peter's letter? With the Lord one day is like a thousand years? What is that about? Good for him, but what about us? Maybe it's like how we feel about these winter days, on which the darkness closes in on both ends of the day. Why do we have to put up with it? We just can't wait for the spring, when the light will be extended. Is there a point to being patient? What rewards shall we reap from our willingness to put up with the darkness and the anxiety and the doubt that we feel in our lives? What kind of virtue is patience when all we want is for there to be some solution, some quick fix, to make us feel better.

And then there are the familiar and lovely words from the prophet Isaiah. Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid...Despite the words of hope, why is it that it takes so long for the Lord to return with might? Why did Jerusalem have to suffer? Why do we have to suffer? Our patience runs thin and we look for answers to our questions wherever they might be. I've just got to do something about this situation; I've

got to take control and decide my own fate. I can't wait, I just can't wait.

There is a very real tendency when I read the words of scripture to wonder whether God is playing with us. It is easy for someone like me to stand up here and repeat Peter's reminder that "with the Lord one day is like a thousand years," but do I really expect that to make you feel better. We sing the words, "Comfort, O comfort my people," as beautiful as they are, and are still left with the reality of our anxiety and illness and brokenness that need to be comforted. Why doesn't God just do something? We believe, we try to be good people. Let's get on with it. Let's get on with it.

But, apart from my blasphemy, maybe we need to look a bit more closely at what our scripture lessons tell us about the patience of our Lord. Can we find a way to join Peter in professing that "the patience of the Lord is salvation?"

I believe that in order to understand the patience of our Lord, we need to try to put ourselves in God's shoes, as difficult and treacherous as that might be. Perhaps it is not that God is playing with us, perhaps it is that God loves us so much that he must be patient with us.

Consider what we believe. God created the heavens and the earth, along with all the beasts of the earth, and he pronounced his creation good. And it was good until Adam and Eve violated God's only rule. And from that moment forward, all of God's creation has suffered with the tension of being good, but also being sinful by nature. We have fallen away from God. As we explore the history of humankind, we must admit that there have been innumerable times when God might have simply done away with us. We certainly believe he has that power. What has kept God from allowing us to self-destruct, if not doing the deed himself?

Consider also that we believe that God loves his creation, even in its fallen state, and God hopes that his people will repent their sins, accept his love, and do his will. He continues to wait for us, to be patient with us, to do what he can do to help us believe, to help us see what he intends for us, what he hopes that we will become.

With this God's eye view of patience is a virtue, perhaps we should return to our scripture to see what God wants us to see. What does John the Baptist do but sacrifice himself, his own

comfort and safety, to bring the good news of one who is to come? John the Baptist is a gift from God – a sign of his patience with us – reminding us that we must repent, that we must do God's will, that there is something worth watching for. Jesus is coming.

And what does Peter do but lift up for God's people the remarkable fact that we should be glad that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, because that means that we have more time to repent, to lead lives of holiness and godliness, to await the new heavens and earth, where righteousness is at home. The patience of the Lord, then – his gift to us of waiting for us, of giving us time to believe, to repent, to do his will – is indeed the promise of salvation. Just imagine what might happen to us if God were not patient.

And Isaiah is very clear that the comfort God is speaking for his people is not something we have earned, it is the gift of receiving double for all of our sins. Yes, we have strayed like lost sheep, but God does not leave us without assistance. He will feed his flock like a shepherd, carry the lambs in his arms, gently lead us. Isaiah tells us to get up to a high mountain and proclaim, "Here is your God," here is your patient, loving God, waiting for his creation to accept his love and do his will.

The patience of the Lord is to be regarded as salvation – that is why God waits for us, not to leave us comfortless, alone with our doubt and anxiety, but to show us he loves us. He loves us so much that he sent his only Son into the world as a sacrifice for our sins, to show us that he will give his all to restore all of his creation. In this Advent season, we should marvel at God's patience with us, for it is his promise of life eternal.

There are a couple of aspects of God's patience that I think are helpful to lift up in this season of waiting and preparation.

First, I am struck that, for most of us, being patient is difficult because it seems like such a solitary thing. Being patient, for us, somehow equates with being alone. The patience of the Lord, on the other hand, always seems to be grounded in communities. It is the Christian community to which Peter's letter is addressed; it is the blessed city of Jerusalem of which Isaiah speaks; it is people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem who flocked to hear John the Baptist and to be baptized. God shows us that being patient is something that we can do as a people, not only as individual persons. Think about that – at least

for me, one of the reasons I find it difficult to be patient is that I forget that there are others who can help me be patient, others with whom I can share the gift of patience. This Advent, perhaps we can find ways to use our common resources and faith and wisdom to learn and wait, to be patient, to not rush to get things done, to look beyond the immediate circumstances that seem so bleak and hopeless. There is hope, God teaches us; help each other to be patient for that hope.

The second lesson we might consider this Advent season is that God shows us that patience is not passive. To be patient does not mean to do nothing. God is active – even as he is patient. God is tending his sheep, God sent John into the world to preach repentance, God sent his Son into our midst to save us, God is in our history, loving and creating and comforting his people. Why do we think that being patient means we can't do anything? Perhaps it is because we don't have the eyes and ears and hearts of faith to see and hear and believe that there is work to be done all around. It is God's work – and he waits for us to join him in convincing the whole of creation to believe, to repent, to get busy, to see glimpses of salvation that are in our patience here and now.

Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Shout it from the high mountains: Here is your God. Here is your patient and loving God. Amen.