

When patience is not enough

Part 3 of a series: Steady now. There's hope for us. There really will be something to celebrate!

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, December 12, 2010: The Third Sunday of Advent.
Based on James 5:7-10 and Matthew 11:2-11.*

Advent 4: Christmas: too much intimacy?/Matthew 1:18-25.

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. In the name of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Visitors and new members often ask me what the difference is between the Rector and the Vicar, most knowing rector but being less clear about what a vicar is and does. I have a new answer. When the Rector and Vicar share a short sermon series, the Vicar is the one who gets to preach on patience. Patience—I am supposed to preach about patience to a parish at the crossroads of New York City, filled with type A personalities, some lucky enough to be desperately hoping to soon learn about the size of their bonus, others anxiously waiting to hear about any job at all, and most of us just constitutionally and geographically impatient at the most frantic time of the year. This is a piece of cake.

I just don't know about patience. Though this is not good public relations for a priest, I have to admit that secretly I am not even drawn to patient people; I find them less beatific than bland. Further, I am almost certain that Jesus was not patient; ask the moneychangers whose tables he tossed far and wide how patient he was; and finally, the star of the Advent season, John the Baptist, was anything but; screaming "you brood of vipers" at the religious folks does not qualify as an act of patience.

So what, I ask you, is a sermon on patience doing squarely in the middle of the short season of Advent? After a week of thinking about it, I have concluded that it is not a trick—neither Bill's nor the lectionary's—but that it is a challenge and an important one. The epistle this morning puts it before us. There is not consensus about who wrote the book of James, whether Jesus' brother or a later disciple. We do know that the writer lived and wrote in the anticipation of the immediate coming of the end, the end of time. When this James, whoever he was, wrote, "Be patient, beloved, until the coming of the Lord," he did not believe that it would be a long wait, believing instead that the hours he was living were among the final few ever to be lived.

As inheritors of this tradition we join all Christians who have come before us in accommodating the striking disconnect between our experience and that which early Christianity taught: that the end was imminent and that it would occur dramatically and finally. That event did not take place—not yet, anyway, though there have been and no doubt shall be many more predictions that the time is nigh. In my heart of hearts, I do not believe that we are headed toward that sort of end. I could be wrong, but everything I know or hope I know about God is that God seeks fullness and completion of creation rather than its destruction. Living in the dread of such a possibility is simply not helpful to me, and arrogantly I would go so far as to question the longevity of the conversions, no doubt numerous, that such teaching has engendered through the centuries. Jesus repeatedly said, "The kingdom of God has come near."

How we got from that to "This is not our home, we are just-a-passing through," as the old gospel hymn claims, is a great mystery. One might hear James' advice to be patient in that way as a call to passivity, to resolution and acceptance. But clearly it is not that. Earlier in this letter, James verbally assaults the rich, who have become wealthy on the backs of the poor through exploitation and greed. James, in a way that Paul and others who proselytized Gentiles were not, is a church person and is particularly sensitive to the difference between rich and poor church members and to the different regard that affluent Christians sometimes enjoyed at the expense of poorer Christians. He does indeed say to the poor that there will be a better day coming, but he challenges the church to function in its *current* life without regard to who has more. Earlier in the letter, he writes:

If a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please,' while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there,' or, 'Sit at my feet,' have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor.

Thank God James did not simply say to the poor, “Buck up and be patient, you poor mistreated people, for the day of the Lord is at hand.” He was utterly clear that for followers of Jesus, there is an ethic of life that requires treating one another lovingly and fairly regardless of when the end would come.

Living this out in the complicated mix of life, particularly of life that inherently supports homeostasis, has not always been easy. Many powerbrokers admonished Martin Luther King to go slowly in trying to right the wrongs of prejudice and discrimination, to be patient while the needed change in heart and mind occurred. Dr. King declined their advice, but at ultimate cost. Many in the church told women who sought to be ordained to the priesthood to go slowly, to be patient while the church came around through a process of slow conversion. In 1974 when three bishops of the Episcopal Church irregularly ordained eleven women, many powerful church persons were enraged. They had preached patience but were ignored. For gay and lesbian soldiers risking their lives every single day for their service in our military, this week’s failure to repeal “don’t ask, don’t tell” is a crushing setback. To admonish patience to them is to reward mistreatment.

So we don’t live—probably most of us don’t—in the fear of the immediate end of the world; and it is clear than any attempt to use the bible as a whole to teach patience rather than change is indefensible. What, then, does patience have to do with the life of faith? In spite of my best intentions, I think it does have something quite powerful to do with faith.

You know the story of the Prodigal Son, of course. The young son, arrogant and insistent, asks his father for an early distribution of inheritance, goes off, wastes it in debauchery, and returns home only after landing in a pigpen. Through it all, the prodigal’s father is a picture of patience that inspires me. He was patient in a good way, a faithful way. He sat on the front porch and watched for his son even in the absence of any evidence that the young man ever intended to come home. Only a parent whose love is likened to that of God would sit watchfully and optimistically, continuing to believe about his son what others long before had stopped believing. And when he saw him, his patience at long last having paid off, he ran like a young man, down the road to meet the son who had come home. Good patience, active patience, patience that believed and hoped the best, patience that was not maudlin but anticipatory, patience that resulted in joy.

Maybe being patient is about letting go without giving up. As far as we know the prodigal’s father continued to successfully run his farm and household, maintaining his other relationships. In our parlance, we would say that he apparently let go to live and go on with life without obsessing about his lost son. But in his heart he never gave up. Every day he found a moment to ease out on the porch to watch for a while.

Advent is about that kind of watchfulness, that kind of patience. All that is to be is not yet. Between the services this morning, I talked to a precious little girl, who has experienced a great loss. I told her to listen for these words—*that all that is to be is not yet*—because they are true and hold us up when times are grand and when they are not. Accepting that though we control a great deal, we don’t control everything, not even close, may be the most important lesson we have to learn every year during Advent. I know it is the most important one for me. If everyone I love would just do what I think they ought to do Only when I try to ignore that crazy voice can I begin to know peace.

Holy patience, it seems to me, offers an experience of life that is not frantic and panic-stricken. Sometimes I am so impatient for life to be full and rich that I think I strip it of its natural and easy joyfulness, the kind of joy which Jesus seemed to have, the joy that embraced great little kids, big time screw-ups, and all manner of humanity in between. Patience is not about being dulled and resolved; it is about being open to an unfolding story, the ending and fullness of which come only from the hand of God. Advent patience is the promise of God with us as the story unfolds.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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