

The Coming of the Lord

James 5:7-10

Welcome to this Third Sunday of Advent. Our scripture, written by James, encouraged the early Christians, probably Jewish Christians, to stand firm, not to judge one another, but to bear each other's faults and failings with patience. James teaches us to have patient endurance. Traditionally, the Third Sunday of Advent is known as Gaudete Sunday, a command to "rejoice." In this season of preparation and expectation, we are commanded to rejoice. **Patrick J. Howell**

With Christmas fast approaching, the desire is particularly tempting to throw over the traces of anticipation and preparation to head straight for the manger. Happily, our scripture counters that force of Christmas with a compelling plead for patience "until the coming of the Lord." Using the very down-to-earth image of a farmer waiting patiently for his "precious crop" to grow until "it receives the early and the late rains," the writer implies that the Lord's return will not be just any day now, but will occur when what is needed for his return has fully taken place. The crop can break forth fully only after the second rain.

Many of us grew up with the adage "Patience is a virtue." It comes to mind as we read the opening words of this text from James: "Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord." The author compares the patience he encourages to the patience of the farmer who waits for "the early and the late rains." Then, as the passage ends, the author connects patience with suffering: "As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord." What do patience, suffering, and farming have to do with one another and with the season of Advent?

First of all, the text raises the question: In what circumstances are we to be patient? When is patience a virtue? Certain kinds of work require patience. The woodworker refinishing a piece of furniture, the jewelry repairer fixing a broken clasp, the quilter carefully stitching fabric, the accountant running trial balances to make sure all records are accurate: all of these must work carefully and patiently, because precision and accuracy are demanded by the work they do. Learning various things often requires patience: years of finger exercises precede playing Bach or Mozart; time on the driving range is needed to master a good golf swing; memorization and repetition are required to learn any new language. All of us understand this kind of patience—the "practice-makes-perfect" kind.

Patience can also be a virtue in situations where waiting is required and where we are powerless to change the circumstances: sitting in the car on the freeway during rush hour, standing in the seemingly endless security line at the airport, waiting in the checkout line at the grocery store at 5:00 p.m. with a cashier who is just learning how to run the cash register. In these situations, there is an unavoidable delay. No matter how hard we try, we can exert no control over some important factors in our lives. You can either get angry and fret and feel your blood pressure rise, or you can be patient.

The example that the author of James uses is a patience where you have no control. The author is thinking of dry-land farming in Palestine before the modern invention of drip irrigation that has turned this semiarid region into productive farmland. In classic dry-land farming (such as the way wheat is grown in the central United States), whether or not there is a crop depends almost entirely on how much moisture falls, in what form, and at what time. There must be rain when the crop is put in to germinate the seed and then rains later to nourish the crop. However, when rain or hail comes just before harvest, the results can be disastrous. Since there is

nothing the farmer can do about this, they learn one way or the other how to wait.

Cynthia M. Campbell

Facing James's double exhortation to be patient, the problem is that not many of us are farmers, who willingly subject themselves to timetables not of their own making, specifically, the utterly not-under-our-control seasons of nature. Most of us do not have an innate inclination to patience, either. In our scripture James reminds us what we already know: if the Lord has made a promise, you can bet your life it will come true. So, like the tiny shoots of green that appear in the soil after the first rain, there are signs all around that what has been promised is already being fulfilled. In the faith communities to whom James wrote, "prayers of faith" were saving the sick "and anyone who had committed sins was forgiven." Signs of the nearness of salvation were visible already.

In addition to practicing patience, James prescribed a second spiritual exercise: "Strengthen your hearts," he urged; the reason is the same as the reason for patience: "The Lord is near." Whatever the length of time we have to wait, heart strength is essential to our survival. The Letter of James was addressed to communities who, like ours, lived in a culture that gave little heed to the values of the Christian tradition or to the good news of Jesus Christ. If having a strong heart spiritually is in any way comparable to having a healthy cardiovascular system in one's physical body, then exercise must be a part of it. You cannot stand against the forces of evil, indifference, or oppression with flabby faith, puny hope, or on-again-off-again love.

One way you strengthen your heart is to avoid "grumbling against one another." What an odd and yet appropriate exhortation. Survival over the long haul requires patience, not only with the Lord who will return in God's own good time, but with each other, lest we destroy the community that holds us up during the waiting.

Another reason not to grumble is that others will judge us and, in us, the Christ whom we claim to serve. In these between times, how do people know what Christ is like, if not through each of us? There is only the body of Christ to witness to his lordship and his love.

The most important reason not to grumble, however, is that God will judge us for it. As a matter of fact, "the Judge is standing at the doors!" If we do not want to be judged by the Judge, we had best leave judgment of others to the Judge as well. The day of salvation is near, and when that day comes, the Lord will take care of everything and everybody. Until then, the thing for us to do is to attend to the sinner who lives under our own hat.

Finally, the writer advises the people to allow the prophets of old to be their role models in "suffering and patience." He is not suggesting suffering for the sake of suffering, but suffering as the often-inevitable consequence of being true to God in an alien or indifferent environment. If the prophets had to pay through suffering, then let the same be so with each of us.

We are not likely to be stoned, beheaded, or burned at the stake any time soon, but we live as much under the demand of faithfulness as did our courageous ancestors whom we know from Scripture, history, and, in many instances, the stories our families tell. All of us know stories of these who worked for justice and relief for those in need. Today we will participate in a Christmas party for children whose fathers are in prison, to tell them of the love of their earthly father and of a heaven father that loves them! We gather food for those who are homeless. We gather mittens, hats, scarves, and warm socks for those in need. We will worship and serve with the people at Carriage Town Ministers on the 30th. We do monthly worship and communion services at American House North. We will plan on the 30th on how we will serve this community and our God in 2014....in anticipation that Christ will

return and we want to be found faithfully working. Christians are subject to "the perfect law ... of liberty" (Jas. 1:25; 2:12), which culminates in the "royal law" of love of one's neighbor (Jas. 2:8). When we become Christians we must take our faith seriously in our daily lives. We must translate our faith into action. My parents were farmers who learned to wait on God. They sent all 11 of us children to college. If you had asked them why they would have said they saw a new world coming.

Ignatius of Loyola urged that "we pray as if everything depended on God, and ... work as if everything depended on us." Let us hold on to the vision and live in love until the Lord comes again. **Joanna M. Adams**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.