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Grace and Holy Trinity Church
December 15, 2019
James 5:7-10 & Matthew 11:2-11

Don't pray for patience, I hear over and over my grand mother's advice in my head, especially during Advent, when we stop and be present, watchful, and vigilant. She used to say, Don't pray for patience because it will be tested. So when we are told to make the path straight, the way clear, the highway level, all those stirring images about change and seeing what God has in store for us. I hear, Don't pray for patience, but have patience, like John, the Baptizer who, during his imprisonment, kept vigil and kept his faith. I don't know about you, but when I am waiting, it can feel akin to being penned in, constrained, held back by some invisible force even when I am free from shackles, bars, and jailors.

When waiting for monumental change, time passing can feel like an eternity. Isn't that

what we are expecting in Advent, the entire nature of the world to change. What else would we seek when the world seems full of hatred, violence, discrimination, separation, and damage to creation. It can feel more than a little disheartening when we feel called to love our neighbors, feed the hungry, shelter the exposed, visit the prisoners, comfort the afflicted and so on. I know that I can't possibly do it all. I also know that pain, isolation, accommodation, and hunger pangs won't listen if I try to say "not now."

Responding to our neighbors' needs can't wait. Ought we weigh our options and consider who is more deserving the person who is hungry, or thirsty, the individual imprisoned, or sick, or alone in the world, who should be cared for right now? Who should we tell to have patience and wait until tomorrow?

When I consider these kinds of questions, I feel like the woman in the "Faith Hope and Charity" stained glass window in our main sanctuary. The one who seems to be wrestling with three young children. In it she holds one

body to her chest, another to her hip and a third stands slightly off to the side. She seems able to, almost, do it all. However, she also has both of her hands full. She seems to be looking to the child who she cannot comfort, cannot hold, saying I'm sorry, but you will just have to wait, please be patient with me.

Many of us understand being overwhelmed by the need and feeling the desire of waiting, expecting, and anticipating our own needs being met. We hope that we will see and be seen but recognizing that we might need to wait. It is the kind of waiting that we embark upon that determines if we practice patience, or if our patience is tested.

When we feel trapped when we feel limited when we feel like we can't possibly respond to all the needs in the world, we can choose our response. We can react like John, who, when he was in prison, heard of the Messiah's works. So he sent word wondering if this was the one to

come or if there was another. In prison John asked for confirmation of miracles. There was nothing to be done but listen, wait and pray. He was confined physically, but he couldn't be confined emotionally or spiritually. He waited patiently, which meant he was prepared to wait longer, but also was ready to act if the time had come.

I cannot help but connect John to another prophetic preacher who wrote about waiting while imprisoned in a Birmingham Jail. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's inspired letter concludes with the statement, "If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having a patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me." Dr. King's response to clergy, who called the efforts at integration to be "unwise and untimely." Dr. King knew that the time for waiting had already passed. No one could rightly accuse him of impatience.

Patience is not something that someone else can hold you to beloved siblings. It is not something that you can be made to learn. It is a spiritual practice. It is not a skill like baking bread or fixing an engine. Patience cannot be taught or forced. It can be encouraged and modeled, but no one can make you patient.

No one. Not even God can make us do what we do not want to do. That is the blessing of free will. We don't have to stop what we are doing. We don't have to take a deep breath or meditate or pray or drink water. The choice is ours. The option is each of ours as to whether we will wait patiently for the Lord, or we will throw a fit.

Through his own free will, John waits patiently as a farmer waits for the rain during the growing season or waits for the first and last fruits of the harvest. John confined by his cell. Imprisoned by the religious and political authority of his day, John is able to embody patience. He shows us how we, too, can be stuck physically,

emotionally, and spiritually but will still be able to demonstrate patience.

How are we waiting? Are we waiting like John? Or are we waiting in despair? Anxiety? Doubt or misery or pain? There are certainly times when waiting is tinged with desperation while we wait for a diagnosis, or death, or any other kind of loss or grief. But there are also times when we wait in joy, on the eve of our wedding day, while waiting for the adoption to be finalized, when the cast list is posted for a show, on match day for medical school, then excitement and hope of good things surround us. But neither of these two modes of waiting resemble the vigil we keep in Advent.

Advent is the time when we are awaiting a stirring, a new birth full of hopefulness, which defies all we know in favor of what we choose to believe. It is simultaneously terrifying and exhilarating to think that we are living in the expectation of things which we cannot and will not know until they occur.

Advent is what John knew. His imprisonment was not going to end well. He had upset not only the religious authorities but the leaders of the temple and interpreters of the law. He was persona non grata to the Israelites who had any power. Yet despite knowing all of this to be true, John holds on to hope, comes to believe that the Messiah, the one whose shoe he is not worthy to tie, has come, and possibly to his surprise, that Jesus of Nazareth, John's kin maybe that Messiah.

So while John waits for news from his disciples. He practiced the spiritual discipline of patience. His waiting is tinged with hope and joy in the face of a brutal reality awaiting him in Herod's prison.

That is what we mean to be encouraged by today. In the Advent, season of waiting, we as a community of believers live in the in-between time. In the season of already, but not yet, we know that Jesus Christ cured the sick healed the lame and restored the broken. But have yet to see with our own eyes. So with an uncertain

future, we can despair and doubt, or we can persevere and hope. We choose hope.

The hope we hang our faith on is a balance of patience and progress. There have been trials and tribulations in each of our lives. There are times when we are sure and unsure about what to do. There will be times when it feels as if God is the woman standing with arms full, in that image over there.

We can respond to the "now, wait" command with a tantrum and with patience. We may be okay with waiting for a while, but if it takes "too long," we may freak out. Or if we think God is saying No, instead of not yet, we may pout and stomp our proverbial feet.

But the thing we remember about the intention of Advent is that our sense of time and understanding of what is best for ourselves is not the basis of the universe- God is God, and we are not. We learn to trust in the Lord, to wait for the Lord, and to take joy in the waiting by

observing Advent. We will be cared for, as only God can care for us when the time is perfect. And in the meantime, we do our best balancing patience and progress to stir up hope in this world and the unexpected great things to come.

This is a liturgical season, which is meant to remind us that we are not in control. Our expectations shatter the same way that John, the man who proclaimed the coming of the Messiah, is disarmed by Jesus' arrival. The same way that we will be surprised to find that if we wait patiently for the Lord, we may actually accomplish more than we had imagined possible in the meantime. After all, we are the body of Christ in the world, inspired by the Holy Spirit and created by an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-seeing, all-present God who loves us, and we can take a moment to breathe, to pray, to eat and to drink. We can be patient while figuring out how God's will may be done in our own lives and in the lives of all those we love.

Let us stop praying for patience, and instead embody it, like John. Choosing hope in

opposition to all those things that tell us what to expect. Amen