

Sermon for Advent 3, Year A

Text: James 5:7-10

Today's short reading from James calls us to be patient. James gives us an illustration from life on the land to show us what patience looks like: "See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the land, waiting patiently over it until he may receive the early and latter rains."

But James' call to patience is not in the context of farming but waiting for the coming of the Lord. The original audience that this letter was intended for was the "Twelve tribes scattered among the nations"--Jewish Christians, most likely from the early Jerusalem church who, after Stephen's death, were persecuted and subsequently scattered as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Syrian Antioch and who suffered trials and oppression on account of their faith in Jesus.

James writes these verses as part of his letter of instruction and encouragement to these Jewish Christians dispersed through the nations. You can imagine how they would have needed that encouragement. After waiting for hundreds of years for the Saviour promised of old, finally the Lord had come to free them. These Jewish Christians recognized this Jesus who rode into Jerusalem on a colt as so much more than a political liberator that the rest of the nation was hoping for. Through the writings of the Prophets these Jewish Christians recognized that this Jesus was the promised Christ, the Messiah who the prophets had pointed to. He had come to defeat death with his own death. He had come to free the people from the chains of their sin. He came to triumph over the powers of darkness by making a mockery of them by the Cross. These Jewish Christians believed this and because of their belief both the Jewish religious authorities and the Roman government who feared this steadily increasing group was a threat decided they were just as deserving of the same fate as their Lord. You could imagine how patience would have been hard for these early Christians. When would Jesus return and rescue them from such hostile persecution that took their lives and broke their homes and churches and scattered them far throughout the empire?

Patiently waiting is hard. Patiently waiting for the crops to be harvested is hard. Patiently waiting for good news from health tests is hard. Patiently waiting for our children to mature is hard. Patiently waiting for broken families to be restored is hard. Patiently waiting for dearly loved ones who are distant from God to turn to him, is hard. Patiently waiting for Jesus to come again is hard. We see the news, we hear the reports. Suffering, brokenness, selfishness, greed, exploitation, rejection of Christ and his Word as society slides into moral oblivion. We grow impatient: "Hurry, Lord! Come and deliver us from strife and calamity, suffering and injustice. Why are you taking so long?" The lyrics from Robin Mann's song comes to mind:

*Wars have come and wars have gone;
come, Lord, come!
Still the cry goes up, "How long?"
Come, Lord, come!
Hearts are breaking, tears fall down;*

come, Lord, come!
Come and free us, we are bound.
Come, Lord, come!
Come, Lord Jesus, come
into this weary world.
O, how we long for you to
come, Lord, come.

James encourages his original audience, the scattered Jewish Christians—and us today—by telling us that the time has already drawn near: “Therefore be patient brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the land, waiting patiently over it until he may receive the early and latter rains. *You also, be patient, and set your hearts immovable because the coming of the Lord has drawn near.*”

It is so appropriate that this reading has been set aside for the third Sunday in Advent. The word ‘Advent’ itself means ‘coming’ or arrival of an important occasion or person. During the four Sundays of Advent we look forward to the important occasion of Christmas and its celebration of our Lord’s coming as a human baby born at Bethlehem as the Saviour of the world. And it is Jesus’ birth, this Advent of the promised Saviour, which marks the beginning of the end times. The end is near. And so during these four Sundays of Advent we have a second focus on preparing for Jesus’ final coming as King at the end of time.

No one knows when that day will be. Today, James simply tells us that Christ’s return will be soon. He speaks as if it has just happened: it has drawn near. Only a door separates us from the judge of all humanity. The closeness of Jesus’ return is an encouragement to us to stand firm and set our hearts immovable, trusting in Jesus. It is an encouragement for us to be patient as we wait for His coming. As a farmer waits for the rains to come for his precious crop, so is the church called to wait patiently for her coming Lord Jesus. If he can be trusted with his promise to rise again three days after his death, he can be trusted to return and save his faithful people—and soon.

This encouragement for us to wait for our Lord patiently has practical implications for how we live as the Lord’s people. James tells us: “Do not groan against one another, brothers (and sisters) in order that you will not be judged. Behold, the Judge stands before the door.” Now of all the things James could correct us about, why grumbling? Why not the ‘big stuff’? Why not be concerned with sexual immorality or theft or drunkenness, or the regularity of our church attendance? Why this concern about groaning against one another?

Could it not be for this reason: when we are not patient with one another, we grumble against one another and our grumbling more often than not leads to judging of one another: “They aren’t living a Christian life!” “They call themselves Christians!” “I’m more of a Christian than they are!” The problem with that is that the only One with the authority to judge stands at the door. If we decide what the standards are of belonging to God’s family—who is acceptable to be called a child of God and who is not, by what they have or haven’t done—then those same standards apply to us. In effect we’re saying to Jesus: “This is the standard I want you to judge me by.” Then we judge ourselves by our own words, because we ourselves fail to measure up to the very standards and ideals we hold others accountable to. Remember Jesus said: “...first take

the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." And someone said once: "Yes! I wish *they* would take the log out of *their* eye..." They missed the whole point. We *all* need optical deforestation.

Waiting patiently for the hope that we have—our Lord to return and take us to be with him in Heavenly glory, away from the troubles of this life—means that while we wait patiently, we *wait patiently together, with one another*. Patience is counting down without blast-off. Patience is the ability to put up with people you'd like to put down.

Be patient, and set your hearts immovable because the coming of the Lord has drawn near. Do not groan against one another, brothers [and sisters], in order that you will not be judged. What does this look like in practice? The commandments show us. Instead of grumbling we are to use our tongues as the second commandment directs: We are to not take the name of the Lord our God in vain, but to call on him in prayer, praise and thanksgiving—not only for what he has done, but for the service and blessings he gives through all people and especially those in the church. So associated with this is the 8th commandment: To not bear false witness against our neighbour.

This means that we are to fear and love God by using our tongues to not betray, slander or lie about our neighbour, but defend them, speak well of them and explain their actions in the kindest way possible. When we are tempted to slander, or gossip let us instead call on God to help us use our tongues to build each other up with the promises the Gospel makes about who we are in Christ. If we are slandered or gossiped about by others let us call on God to help us speak with that person in an assertive but loving way asking if we have hurt them. Ask *them* for forgiveness first and be patient and forgiving when they ask it of you, rather than repaying evil with evil. Look for any opportunity to serve those who grumble against you. Instead of grumbling against them picture them with the crown of righteousness on their head, because like you, they too have been baptised into the family of God, washed clean by the blood of Jesus, free from condemnation.

Easy to say, isn't it? "Be patient." Not so easy to put into practice. Patience is not natural. It is a gift from the Holy Spirit, Paul tells us in Galatians 5. Thank God that we are not left to our own strength (or lack of it) to exercise the patience God calls us to while we wait for Jesus' return. Patience is a gift of God—a fruit of his Spirit as the Spirit goes to work through God's Word in our lives.

Brothers and sisters wait patiently for your Lord. He is the Judge who stands at the door. For all those who trust in him, no matter how undeserving we might think they are, his judgement is that they are righteous and just through faith in the shed blood of the Lamb. Do you trust in Jesus and his Cross as your salvation and righteousness? Then his judgement for you is that you are his Heavenly Father's forgiven child, holy and precious to him, and so you will not receive condemnation but righteousness and life in his presence. Therefore, don't use these last days idly, but have courage in the promise of your baptism, that Christ is with you to the very end of the age, strengthening you through his Word and Sacraments to grow in patience in word and deed. He promises to do this until the fruit of the harvest will come—the fulfilment of what the prophets have spoken of, and what the Lord Himself has promised—that he will return in glory to take you, his faithful people, to be with him in paradise for all eternity. Amen.