

15 December 2019 – Advent 3

Isaiah 35; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Lydia Simmons

“Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.”

What does this mean – be patient? We often hear “be patient” used to mean “stop making a fuss”: “Are we there yet? Are we there yet?” “No, be patient”. “Grin and bear it.” “Stiff upper lip.”

And yet. James says, “As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord”. The prophets, as paragons of patience? They hardly do anything but ask “Are we there yet?”, loudly and often melodramatically. They certainly don’t put on a false smile and pretend everything is OK. They aren’t afraid to make a nuisance of themselves.

The prophets show us that holy patience **does not** mean being OK with the way things are. Holy patience is dissatisfaction; tension; a dialectic, if you like, between what is and what should be, holding them together like opposed magnets. It’s difficult, it’s active, and it can be exhausting. In fact, if patience seems easy, we should consider whether it’s really patience at work or complacency, or inertia, or resignation, or fear of disturbing the status quo.

So how do we do patience right? How do we exist in this state of tension without burning ourselves out, and without losing sight of either the reality or the ideal? Well, if the prophets are our example, the answer is clear: prophesy. This isn’t an easy answer for those of us who prefer not to rock the boat, but there’s no way around it; James is clear, and so is Jesus, when he calls John the Baptist, this weird guy on the edge of town yelling about the end of days, the best of humanity.

Prophecy means running straight into contradiction and tension, naming it, describing it, proclaiming it, certainly to others but first to ourselves. We have to be honest and clear-eyed about how we fall short of our ideals and of God’s call to us. This requires detachment, and humility, and trust, and unglamorous, repetitive practice.

And we also need to have a clear sense of what God’s call is, what we’re waiting for, what is promised. What did you go out into the desert to see? What seemed so important that

it called you away from everything else, like John, crying out “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”?

Yet even after John has found Jesus, after he’s seen the heavens open and the Spirit descending like a dove and a voice from heaven saying “This is my Son” - from a prison cell, all of that must seem distant, fading; maybe he’s wondering whether any of it mattered, whether it was even real.

It sometimes happens to us, too, that God touches something immediate in our souls, that we know something is true with unmistakable, instinctive clarity. And then over time, that clarity fades; we have to hold that same truth by reason and commitment, and trust what has been revealed to us.

So John asks: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Am I really to give up my life for you? Is this the right time and place? To which Jesus says: look around you. You know what you stand for, you know what you’ve been waiting for; the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped – now the wait is over. Trust your own words, Jesus says, and think again; repent, for the time has come.

The point of all our waiting is, after all, to stop waiting! Our real goal is not to be patient; our goal is to be ready. We cannot become so accustomed to the hard dryness of the desert that we refuse to blossom when the rain comes. And this is easy to do. Often, the only thing stronger than the pain of not acting is the fear of acting, and so Isaiah tells us “Strengthen the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees; say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God will come.’”

We look for the coming of Christ, the breaking of the day, streams in the desert. Sometimes we wait for a very long time; sometimes we are caught by surprise; but whenever the time comes, we must act without delay: blossom – rejoice – run out to meet him. What did you go out into the desert to see? A prophet, and more than a prophet. We go out into the desert to wait for it to bloom.