

The Weight of Waiting
The Third Sunday in Advent
James 5:7-11
December 16, 2018
First Baptist Church, Pottstown
Rev. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

It wasn't too far into my adult life that I learned that it is dicey business to pray for patience because it might just turn out that you get to *practice* the skill you prayed for. When babies were spewing green beans into my face and toddlers were telling me "no"; and later when middle schoolers needed their own private chauffer and high schoolers just wanted the car, patience was a lovely thing to *already have*, but not so much fun to acquire! And now when kids are no longer "kids" and the consequences of things like an extra piece of dessert seem to have more bearing, when the world seems harsher and folks are more inclined to watch out for themselves than for each other, this idea of waiting for anything, even the coming of God's Own, feels more challenging and less inviting than ever before. And yet the author of the letter ascribed to "James" implores us to be patient, to hang in there, to cultivate endurance in order to receive God's gifts of compassion and mercy.

The letter of James is a strange thing; it's not clear who wrote it, other than a well-educated Greek, and it isn't clear who it's written to. It's this later fact that makes it, in some ways, most accessible to us across the ages; unlike letters written to a specific group for specific times, it's generic enough to be a word *we* can hear, a word that speaks to us today, as we wait once again.

Here James encourages us to be patient, to wait. He, like those to whom he wrote, assumed that the end of time as immanent, that Christ would return soon, and while they knew not when, they assumed that their waiting would not be indefinite, that within their own lifetimes,

the end would indeed be at hand. Of course, here we are reading these words all these years later, a testimony to the fact that they were wrong; that the world didn't end after all, at least, not yet, and if you had been a hearer of James in those days, you would have been far stretched to still be patient after all this time!

But whether we are anticipating the end of the world or the end of this week, patience is still difficult to come by for many; it's a gift that would seem to make our waiting in this Advent season more productive, more valuable to our faith.

James appeals to the prophets of old as examples of patience, although I am not sure exactly who, other than Job, he was thinking of. I mean, Abraham was patient to a point, although he needed constant reassurance that God *really was* going to produce all those heirs God promised. And Sarah, well she laughed in God's face at the thought that she should finally give birth, after being "patient" for more than 80 years. James lists Job among the "patient", although those of you familiar with Job might consider him anything *but* patient; but he did endure, persevere, even as he suffered what seemed like an interminable wait. Perhaps a stronger example would be the prophetess Anna, who's story is recorded in Luke's Gospel: she could be counted among the "waiters" for the coming of God.

Luke 2:36-38 tells her story: *There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after their marriage, then as a widow to the age of eight-four. She never left the Temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.*

Anna- a widow after only seven years of marriage, a reality that was for many, in practicality, a death sentence in her culture. Alone, without a family so it seems, she lives in the Temple, worshipping, praying and fasting her entire adult life. She is called a “prophet”: who was given the authority to offer social commentary for her day, speaking words of wisdom and truth from her place within the sacred space; a woman with hope, with vision, with deep insight into the heart and mind of God.

Anna waited.... for what? **To see God!** To experience the incarnation as it had not happened before! The Gospel account reminds us that when Mary and Joseph brought the infant Jesus to be named, *Anna* was the one who recognized Jesus as God’s Own, as the one she and generations of others had been waiting for all their lives.

Patience, waiting...these are gifts of Advent. To wait with steadfastness like Job, determined to wrestle *even with God* but not give up. To anticipate with faithfulness like Anna, committed to serve God, not for a moment but for a life-time, giving voice to God’s truth, however unpopular, in order to see God’s salvation. This is not just any kind of waiting: this is waiting with meaning and purpose, waiting with endurance and hopefulness, waiting with faith and action in order that *God* might be revealed.

We’ve been talking about waiting: about the kind of waiting that eats up our time and energy. But can we also think about waiting that is life-giving, if we let it be. We can wish away the hours we have to wait: waiting for the kids to grow up, waiting for the job to start, waiting for the answer to come, waiting for our own lives to end.... or we can use our waiting to deepen our experience of ourselves, of God, and of the world around us.

A week ago, I was at a gathering of an interfaith group I am a part of called Daughters of Abraham. "Daughters" is a national organization of local groups of women, who after the tragedy of 9/11, came together as Christians, Muslims and Jews, to build friendships and understanding in order to transcend the hate, ignorance and animosity that divides us. Last week my group gathered, as we always do this time of year, to celebrate the birthday of the Prophet Mohammad, to light the Shabbat and Hanukah candles, and to light the Advent wreath. As we did so, we talked about waiting....and we began to think of what it would mean to consider ourselves "waiters" in the world. What *would* that mean? Think about that: if you go to a restaurant, who comes to your table? A "waiter"! And what does a waiter do? They *ask what you need, they listen carefully, they serve you....* how interesting to think about ourselves as Advent waiters: **those who ask, listen and serve the world in which we live!** How much more productive would our waiting be if instead of grumbling and being resentful that whatever event we are waiting for is not at hand, we instead transformed that time into a time of noticing who and what around us needs our attention now. What if instead of thinking of waiting as lost time, we think of it as **opportunity**: the opportunity to listen to another, the chance to respond to someone else's need as we wait for our own to be fulfilled. What if we turned waiting into **action**: the action of worship, of prayer, of service to another as we anticipate the coming of Christ?

I was mindful of this as I waited for a particularly obnoxious person to get off the train the other day. Her voice was so loud and her conversation so inappropriate that many around her were disturbed. I couldn't read, couldn't think.... I waited for her stop to come. Then it occurred to me that I could use this time to be productive, to be an active "waiter" in service to both her

and myself. And so, I began to pray—for her, for the situation she so boldly spoke of, for her well-being and for my own. It didn't make her get off the train any sooner, but it did make me feel better about her and myself; it lowered the threshold of frustration I was experiencing, and it actually brought a measure of peace.

The kind of patience James encourages us to embrace is not passive; rather, it's active: looking, listening, attentive to the opportunity of God at hand. It's not sitting around with our hands folded, but with our hearts humbled. It's not waiting at another's mercy, but invoking mercy on another's waiting. It is the experience of being accompanied by God's Spirit, an experience of deep prayer and sacred wonder. It is wrestling with the Holy; it's worshiping with grateful hearts. It is anticipating the embodiment of God's promise—not just in some far-off time and place but on *this* day, in *this* place. It's not about judging, as James reminds us, and as I needed to remind myself, but rather about justice. About becoming the prophetic voice of Anna at any age, in any place, infused with the ways and wisdom of God.

This Advent waiting has weight to it; it has substance, meaning, purpose. I remember an elder in a congregation I served saying to me, "We older people can wait; We're in no hurry." What a gift that aging might bring. To count the time we wait as a gift, a lesson, an opportunity. To consider each moment precious, valuable, in and of itself, full of potential and possibility. To slow down the pace, not only of our minds and bodies, but of our spirits; to listen closely to the stillness in our lives. These are gifts of Advent, of aging, of Anna—we can become "waiters" for God.

I actually think that waiting *does* get easier as we get older. I seem less eager to hurry though the days as they fly by. I am more inclined to let the moments of waiting lay open as

possibilities, to allow the spirit of God to seep into the places I have not yet figured out how to fill. And that is where the possibility of incarnation is born again...God in us, us in God. On the train, in the carpool, at the restaurant, office or living room. Weighty time, waiting time...time for the indwelling of God.

“This is the day which God has revealed,” says Anna, in the words of Miriam Therese Winter. “I am filled to the brim with joy. Into old age with its limitations, my God has remembered me. How long, O God, have I waited for a sure sign of liberation, waited with hope, waited with faith for the dawning of this day. And not my heart has feasted upon the One who is my salvation. I have looked into a human face and have seen the face of God.”

This is the gift of waiting: that in our attentiveness to the possibilities of this moment, of this season, we might look into the face of one another—stranger and friend---and see the face of God!

The days are drawing close; the time is nearing. Be an “waiter” in this Advent season; use this time to see, hear, and serve those around you. And you will be rewarded as was Job and Anna, even as James promises...with the compassion and mercy of our God, who comes to us.