

Advent 3A
Peace, Seattle
November 28, 2010 epk
James 5:7-10, Matthew 11:2-11

PASSIONATE PATIENCE

Brueggemann prayer: In our secret yearnings we wait for your coming, and in our grinding despair we doubt that you will. And in this...place we are surrounded by witnesses who yearn more than do we and by those who despair more deeply than do we. Look upon your church... in this season of hope...give us the grace and the impatience to wait for your coming to the bottom of our toes, to the edges of our finger tips....Come in your power and come in your weakness... and make all things new. Amen.¹

By mid-December at Holden Village it's not uncommon to have 100 inches of snow on the ground with hundreds more on the way before the long winter is over.²

As the season deepens the danger of avalanches grows, and a careful protocol of precautions protects people and supplies making the twelve-mile journey from the lakeshore up to the Village. It's the season of survival.

The flow from Copper Creek, the only source for the Village's small hydroelectric plant, falls off steadily due to freezing temperatures in the Cooper Basin, and that means, simply, that there's a very limited supply of electricity to go around; so all the electric appliances in the chalets and housing units of the Village have to be adjusted for the winter.

- Clothes dryers are turned off,
- Cold water washing becomes mandatory,
- Wood becomes the heat source for the buildings;
- Every water heater in every building is synchronized to spread out the electrical demand for evenly as possible.
- And before dishes can be washed, coffee makers and generators for the walk-in freezers must be temporarily turned off.
- It goes without saying that energy-sucking hair dryers or curling irons are not allowed.

But in spite of all the measures I've described—and more—when the demands for electrical current exceed the supply, the hydro shuts down and the power goes out.

Now the hydro is no respecter of persons, or of the clock. It can shut down any moment, at any time of day or night. During winter, this scenario plays itself out sometimes two or three times a day; and sometimes a dozen times.

If you're on the power crew, you immediately go into action to get the power going again.

If your not on the power crew, you simply have to wait for the process to run its course, until, just as suddenly as they went off, the lights come on again.

**I learned a certain kind of patience during my two winters at Holden Village.
You do what you can, and then you wait.**

It was four years ago this week that Seattle was hit by the hurricane-force winds and heavy rains of the Hanukkah Eve storm. The storm ripped large sections of shingles off the roof above us, knocked

¹ *Awed to Heaven, Rooted to Earth: Prayers of Walter Brueggemann*, Edwin Searcy, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), page 146.

² You can find up to date information on Holden weather and snow conditions at: http://www.holdenvillage.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=213&Itemid=183

down trees, sent mudslides careening down hillsides, and shut down the power grid—in some places for the better part of a week. Remember?

This weekend's Pineapple Express will no doubt leave it's mark, too; not so much from damaging winds, but because of heavy rain, high freezing levels, and the inevitable flooding that comes with it.

There are different qualities of patience we come to know through life experiences like these.

In the reading from James today we receive his counsel of patience:

BE PATIENT, THEREFORE, BELOVED, UNTIL THE COMING OF THE LORD.

James gives two examples of what he's talking about. The farmer, and the prophets.

"Remember the farmer," he says, "who waits for the rain to come and water the earth."

Now I've known lots of farmers, but I don't know too many who sit around twiddling their thumbs, waiting for things to happen. The farmer's brand of patience does not involve sitting and waiting.

- It involves carefully surveying his land to see what crop he wants to put in, how much acreage, and which fields he wants to lie fallow.
- It involves repairing and servicing all the equipment so it'll be ready for planting come spring;
- it involves tending to the myriad things there will be no time for when spring planting time comes.

Patience is not passive for the farmer.

James second example is the prophets.

"As an example of suffering and patience," he writes,
"take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord."

Patient prophets?! Isaiah? Jeremiah? Amos? Hosea?

Now I don't know about you, but I've never associated patience with the prophets!

So either James means something different than the conventional, passive meaning of patience, OR there's been a mistake in the translation!

Last week, we met the prophet John the Baptist out on the edge of the wilderness hurling his voice at Israel. John doesn't impress me as a patient man—unless, that is, patience and passion have something in common.

Today we meet John in prison. And from what he has to say, I don't detect a passive patience.

John's has heard reports about Jesus' ministry and he wants to know, are you the one? Are you the Messiah? So he sends some of his disciples to press the question to Jesus directly.

How does Jesus answer?

"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

Signs of the kingdom are visible in the work of Jesus. God's reign is at hand.

John's passionate preparation as the Forerunner of the Messiah has not been in vain.

The passion that possessed John has been passed on to Jesus.

**The kind of patience with which John lived is not passive.
The kind patience to which James refers is not passive.
It's not an invitation to sit back and bide our time until the Lord comes.**

The kind of patience James advises begins with a recognition of what we can do and what we must wait for. This patience involves a careful discerning of options; options perhaps best captured in the Serenity Prayer from the 12-step tradition:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.

One of the hallmarks of compulsive behavior is the person's inability to accept the fact that there is a problem. Until that denial is broken and the powerlessness of the person in the face of the addiction is acknowledged, no recovery can take place.

Our faith in the coming of Emmanuel, is a way of looking at the world, of seeing, of waiting, which doesn't deny the pain we experience, or the pain we see around us in our world.

Instead it moves to meet that pain, even embrace that pain, knowing that God in Jesus of Nazareth is moving with us, before us, surrounding us with his presence as we take steps toward healing and hope.

Patience, for we who follow Jesus, has nothing to do with passivity. It has everything to do with a passionate embrace of hope. It has everything to do with eager longing for the incarnation of God's promises.

This is why we can speak, as Walter Brueggemann does in the prayer I prayed to begin this sermon, of a kind of holy impatience, from "the bottoms of our toes to the edges of our fingertips."

Each of us knows, in our own lives, a quality of this kind of patience.

- We know the times when the power is out, and we are left off-grid and unable to do anything.
- We know the times of watching the lives of those we love unravel before our eyes.
- We know what it's like to wait for the call of our doctor with the results from the latest test.
- **And, as people of faith, we know that the Creator of the universe, who claimed us as his own children in baptism, will not leave us alone in our waiting.**

Isaiah called this journey toward hope "the Holy Way," a sacred road through the wilderness of this world, a desert which, by God's gracious hand, is transformed into a blossoming garden. A place of danger and threat which God turns into a place of safety and abundance.

He spoke of a time when Immanuel would come and usher in a new day. And in Jesus we have seen that new day dawn.

God comes to us, comes to the world, in Jesus;

- walks with us through the pain,
- calls us into companionship with one another,
- invites us to eat and drink nourishment and hope at his Table.

God moves among us in the crucified and risen one; taking on our pain and the pain of the world, and transforming it into resurrection.

May God bless you with passionate patience this season—or even a holy impatience—and a longing that will lead you/us through the wilderness of inner emptiness and onto the holy ground of hope.

AMEN.