

“Things That Help Us To Wait Patiently”

James 5:7–11

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At the beginning of the film “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade” young Indiana manages to recover the Cross of Coronado just before it falls into the wrong hands. He won’t keep it long, this time, but he rushes home with great excitement and starts to tell his father who abruptly stops him. When Indy tries to blurt it out anyway, his father says emphatically, “Wait! Count to twenty.” Indy begins, but his father adds, “In Greek.” Exasperated with impatience, Indy begins again...

It is how we feel about being asked to be patient and wait whether it is for something mundane, like a light to turn green or someone to pick us up; or something significant, like the birth of a child or an end to the war in Ukraine. Patience may be a virtue, as is often said, and good things may come to those wait, but we still don’t like it!

However, not only is “Waiting” the theme of the wonderful current issue of *First Foundations*; this theme shows up in today’s traditional Advent reading from James. James is focused on big-picture things like the coming of the Lord and he is speaking in the context of persecution. The early church suffers for its faith. It’s not just a loss of privilege some in our culture call “persecution.” People are imprisoned and killed like many Jews, Christians, and Muslims in other parts of the world today. The Lord will come to set things right, but when will it happen?!

“Be patient,” says James, as a farmer waits for a precious crop. Be patient with God and each other, not grumbling, as impatient folk do. Be patient and persevere, like the prophets who suffer for their faith, knowing God will take care of them. This is our calling — to be patient and persevere — but how we do it, by counting to twenty in Greek?

It helps to know there are things we should be patient about and things we should not. For example, if something falls in the realm of “practice makes perfect,” as in learning a new language or learning to

play an instrument, patience is a virtue, it is required. We will not pick it up immediately, other than a few irritating prodigies...

In like manner, if we are dealing with something out of our control, patience is needed. The farmer in James' imagery must wait on early and late rains to help the crop grow. In a time before irrigation, he cannot create water, and even if he could, the crop will take time.

Many things in life fall into this category. We do what we can, but it's not up to us alone. It involves timing, the help of others, and God's intervention as well. Healing from an illness, discerning a new career path, gaining clarity about God's calling at this point on our journey — in all these matters, patience is a virtue.

But when it comes to things like abuse in a relationship or injustice in the world, patience is not a virtue. Someone being abused should not wait for their abuser to have a change of heart but get to a safe place as soon as possible. And as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said in "Letter from Birmingham Jail," justice delayed is justice denied. The time was never going to be right for racial justice in the minds of some people. Waiting served no good purpose. In his "I Have a Dream" speech, he referred to this kind of waiting as "the tranquilizing pill of gradualism."

There are things for which we need not wait, and even when we do wait for God, we need not remain completely inactive. Ignatius of Loyola said we should pray as if everything depends on God... and work as if everything depends on us. That is a wise posture. It helps to know there are things we should wait for and things we should not.

It also helps to know that waiting in the context of Christian faith is not a passive enterprise. It is an active expression of trust in God. This is what the farmer does after working his field. He trusts God for the crop. This is what the prophets do when they suffer for their faith. They trust that God's realm will prevail. When we have done all we can to raise our children well, we express confidence not only in them but in God by waiting patiently for them to find their way and claim their faith. To wait is not to be passive or lazy; it is to place our trust in God.

Perhaps an illustration from the dog training world can help. Many of you know we have had German shepherds for a long time. Some also

know that Dana is a dog trainer, having taught at the Richmond Dog Obedience Club and the Winston-Salem Dog Training Club. Our previous female, Kira, was the first therapy pet allowed to visit at Baptist Hospital in Winston-Salem. She saw oncology patients for several years. The requirements for Therapy Dogs International are stringent, but she met them, and she was a gift to the patients and staff.

But not all training goes quite so well. Our current female, Rika, would have been a wonderful therapy dog, but after being the star in two classes and most of a third, she flunked the final exam in the Canine Good Citizen class. When a dog she had not met entered the room, our sweet, human-loving dog turned into Cujo!

But more to the point, before Kira, we had a female named India who won blue ribbons in obedience. So we spent a Thanksgiving weekend in Baltimore, allowing her to compete in two shows. She did well until it came to the down stay where the dog has to wait while the trainer walks a long way away in a room full of dogs waiting. They cannot move until they are called. It depends on training and trust in the trainer to whom the dog is bonded. India's training was solid, and she was bonded to Dana, but she lost it. She broke her stay and ran to Dana, poor thing. It was okay, we loved her, she'd just had enough waiting.

So have we sometimes, and none of us is perfect, we can become impatient, but if our training in faith is solid, and if we trust in God, we can wait longer and with more patience than we think, because we believe, as fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich did, that in the end, all will be well, every manner of thing will be well.

It helps us to know there are things we should be patient about and things we should not, and it helps us to realize that waiting, in the context of our faith, is not a passive enterprise. It also helps us to have some perspective about the primary object of James's waiting, the coming of the Lord. He says, "Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near." The coming of the Lord is *near*. This sounds like good news, but what exactly does it mean?

It may be a reference to time, but if it is, how do we make sense of the claim? If "near" means "soon," and James is referring to a great

cosmic event where Christ returns to set all things right, he is apparently wrong. It has been almost 2,000 years and we are still waiting. But time is a relative thing, especially from God's perspective.

In a lecture entitled "Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time" Stephen Jay Gould offers this illustration of how difficult time is to comprehend. "Consider the earth's history as the old measure of the English yard, the distance from the king's nose to the tip of his outstretched hand. One stroke of a nail file on the king's finger erases human history." That puts things in perspective. Our waiting seems interminable, but in the context of history, it has not been that long, and God's perspective is much broader.

But what if "near" is not a reference to time? What if the coming of the Lord is near in terms of close by but already happening? What if Christ's realm is already in process? According to Mark 1:15, Jesus said, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near..." His mission was to bring God's realm near in his time. "What God intends is not just a far-off future event," he said, "It is happening now!"

Even John the Baptist wonders if this is really the case. In our reading from Matthew 11, he is in prison, God doesn't seem to be setting things right. So, he sends someone to ask Jesus if he is the one who is to come or perhaps they should wait for another. Jesus sends John this message, "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those with skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them..."

It is a message for us too. These are signs that God's realm is near, and there are signs all around us as well. The homeless are housed on cold nights through White Flag, the hungry are fed through And Also with 'Cue and Rise Against Hunger, people are clothed every week, families experience Christmas through Toy Joy, strangers in our land are embraced at Welcome House and here. God's realm may not be complete, but it is in process now!

It's why the choir sings, "Hodie! This day! Christ is born *this day*, alleluia!" Born in Bethlehem, yes, but born also in and through us today. We are called to wait for the completion of God's realm, but experiencing a taste of what it will be makes it easier to wait patiently.