

## Patience, with Joy

Psalm 146     *Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,  
whose hope is in the Lord their God.*

Isaiah 35:1-10     *Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.  
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
"Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God...."*

James 5:7-10     *Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.*

There is no greater challenge and joy than being persons and a community giving ourselves to God's dream for the world, what Jesus called the kingdom of God. And that is what we as a community are about, finding our individual lives in that dream, discovering the particular callings and gifts God gives us, the ways we can be the channels of God's realm, life as God created it to be. Anyone who has tried to take this commitment seriously knows that it is probably the hardest thing we ever do. Why? Because it calls for us to learn patience.

The patience the Letter of James is talking about is not a character trait or something in our emotional make-up. The patience the writer of James has in mind flows from faith that God is working to bring about this new ordering of life, the kingdom of God. Patience is our response to what God has promised, has done, and is doing. The writer offers two examples of patience. First is the farmer who tills, plants, nurtures, waits. The farmer's patience comes from awareness that he or she is cooperating with a creative force larger than his or her own efforts. The farmer, or anyone who works with the earth and growing things, is in partnership with the powers of life. The planting is done, which must be with some knowledge of times and seasons, and then there is the waiting for a harvest that the planter does not bring about.

Second are the prophets of Israel, says James, who show us patience and suffering. The life God calls us to will have times of struggle and discouragement. Patience reminds us that there is a bigger picture and a deeper power at work that we probably do not perceive in the moments of struggle. This kind of patience enables us to keep working with the inward and outward journeys through times of difficulty.

Patience that comes from our trust in God's presence and activity is crucial in three dimensions of life: patience with ourselves, other people, and our callings and missions.

### Patience With Ourselves

The inward journey of prayer, self-awareness, and the deepening of our spirits in God calls for and nurtures patience with ourselves. It is a journey that is always in God. We aren't trying to "get to" God, to achieve a relationship with God. We are clearing away the clutter, removing obstacles, re-knitting our fragmented inner life so that we become aware of the relationship with God we already have. Our healing and reunion with God has already happened in Christ. "You are the light of the world," Jesus said. "You are the salt of the earth." Patience with ourselves is grounded in that gift—we are already loved and accepted by the very Source of Life, which we call God! All we are doing is working with our lives so that we let that gift grow and blossom through our whole being. The spiritual life must not be a matter of forcing ourselves, beating up on ourselves, or turning our inner life into a battlefield. It must be a gentle and non-violent acknowledging of the sources of our pain or alienation—anger, fear, loneliness, depression, resentment, guilt.

We often think that we have to drive away these difficult parts of our inner life. We treat them as enemies or try to avoid them because they are so painful. This only adds more layers of anger, frustration, and self-hate. Patience with ourselves takes a different approach. Believing in God's already-given love for us, which includes forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit, we handle ourselves carefully and gently. We devote part of our meditation time each day to awareness of the things causing us pain. We hold them as we would a wounded or frightened bird, caringly, lovingly. As we do this over time, we understand more fully why those feelings are there, what caused them and how they affect our relationships with others and the way we look at life. With understanding comes healing. The fears become less fearful. The anger becomes less angry. The guilt becomes less crippling. This is opening ourselves to God who is with us already and is already working to bring us healing and wholeness. This is tending the garden of our inner life, thorns and flowers alike, so that God can bring new growth. It all has to do with cultivating the patience, which includes self-acceptance, that brings us to greater and greater awareness and understanding. And with awareness and understanding comes growth and change.

### Patience With Others

As we practice patience with ourselves we know how to practice patience with others. Treating ourselves lovingly as God treats us, we then find insight into how to be patient with others. Just as we take our hands off ourselves,

no longer treating ourselves with violence and aggressiveness, so we take our hands off of others. They do not belong to us, but to God. God is with them just as with us. This takes much work on our part. We think we are loving and accepting people until conflicts arise. Ideas with which we disagree. Habits that irritate us. Understandings of faith that conflict with our own. Weaknesses that arouse our impatience. Or strengths that stir up jealousy or envy.

Our conflicts with others remind us that other people do not exist to conform to our own expectations, ideas, or plans. When conflicts and differences arise, which they always will do, we have a choice. We can put on the gloves and get ready for a fight, or we can take off the gloves and do the hard work of understanding, insight, and peacemaking.

Understanding and insight are crucial. What is it about this person that is driving me crazy? What is it that has triggered aggression and violence within me? What insecurity has been touched? You see, this is first of all insight into ourselves. Each person who comes into our lives has come to teach us something about ourselves and about life. Sometimes they come as a benign and wise person, an easy gift to receive. Sometimes they come as though from another planet, stirring up our insecurities, fears, and aggressiveness. If we posture ourselves for a fight, treat them as an enemy, we never grow, we never learn. We just defend our turf and remain angry, alienated, and unhappy.

Practicing patience, we deepen our understanding of the other person. We don't abandon our own ideas, values, or commitments in order to achieve a false peace. But we go beyond them enough to listen deeply to the other person, entering into a personal dialogue that has understanding, not winning, as its goal. This is hard to do. It takes discipline on our part. Can we detach from our own cherished ideas and values long enough to listen to another person and to understand him or her as fully as we can? Then can we communicate our deeply-held thoughts and beliefs in a non-defensive way that offers the other person the truth of our heart and mind?

Patience with one another also means living peacefully with unresolved tensions and suffering that come from misunderstandings and conflicts. There may not be an easy resolution or any resolution at all, at least as far as we can see. That's when we decide to live together at that deeper level, acknowledging the reality of the conflict or difference, holding it in prayer, but continuing to be together as those whom God has reconciled, even if we don't feel it or are unable to act like it at the moment. Sometimes patience with each other means that we agree to lovingly live with the differences, disagreements, and conflicts between and among us. God is working at a deeper level with us and we remain open to that time and moment when a breakthrough may occur.

#### Patience With Our Missions

Finally, patience with the work to which God has called us. Isaiah was very clear where God's presence and activity are seen—in the lives of those who are suffering, neglected, maligned by religion and society, vulnerable because of age or status in life. That's where God is working. That's where Jesus went. And that's where we are to be. Hearing this good news and experiencing it in Jesus, we are called to be those who strengthen weak hands and make firm feeble knees, the ones who speak and are good news for persons who are suffering. We are called to some mission, some way of being a channel of God's kingdom breaking into the world. The scope or size of the mission is irrelevant. We CAN do great things for God as we follow Jesus' call, using whatever gifts we have been given. But the GREAT thing may not be the BIG thing, at least as we usually define bigness. It means being open to what is right in front of us, being ready to respond to the near circumstances of need, the countless opportunities all around us every day to bring something of beauty, goodness, healing, and strength to people and the world itself.

Being a Christian means being on mission in some way, serving the community of faith itself or the wider community, city, and world. This church was founded on the need for every person to discover what it is God is calling him or her to do with his or her life. About six years ago, in the Festival Center Mission Group, John Withrow said something that touched a very deep place in me. I don't know if I am getting it exactly the way John said it, but I'll say it right the way I heard it: We do not find peace by withdrawal from life and its difficulties and challenges. We find peace by discovering our place in life and living out of that place that God has uniquely given to us. That is our mission, what we feel God has called us to be and do for the sake of the world. And we give ourselves to it with discipline and commitment.

However, this will involve us in suffering. Sometimes it is the suffering of simply wondering whether or not it is real, whether or not it will ever come to be, whether or not we have been called to some wild goose chase. Sometimes it is the suffering of running headlong into obstacles that seem just too overwhelming.

Last August a constellation of disappointments and dead-ends brought me to a point of despair about the Festival Center mission. It just seemed that it would be best to fold it up, celebrate what had been done, and move on to something else. Here two members of our community showed me what we mean by accountability, being held accountable for the commitment we have made, commitment to our inward journey and outward journey. One morning at the Festival Center before the children's program I was sharing with Dolly Cardwell my thoughts about packing it in. She looked me straight in the eyes and said, "Now wait, David." She said it with a gentle firmness that froze me in my tracks. "Two things," she went on. "We need to talk about this as a community, about the place of the Festival Center in our church's life and ministry. And you need to find out what you are called to. If it is, God forbid, to be down here rather than on Boonsboro

Road, then you need to think about that.” Well, it woke me up. I snapped out of the fog I was in. This brought it all back to my own commitment and where I stood with that, where I believed God was calling me. All of a sudden, I had new life and much to pray and think about. Then as we worshiped one night as a mission group, I was sharing my frustrations and impatience. Don Morrison, in his smiling and wise way, spoke after a silence. “David,” he said, “we’ve only been here a year!” I had to laugh. I realized how absurd my feelings were. I had allowed myself to become so strung out over what hadn’t happened and all that I wanted to happen that I had neglected to celebrate and be thankful for what was going on right then and there.

We have patience with the missions to which God calls us because it is God who has called us and it is God who will bring them about. We keep ourselves open to the ways God may be bringing them about, which usually means ways we did not anticipate. And having patience means celebrating and being in the moment, being thankful for what is going on now, not always looking to the results we want and expect. The point is to be joyful for what God has given us to do and to do each thing with carefulness and attention and love. That is the way we plant and tend so that God can bring the growth that God wants.

### Patience and New Life

One more story.

Isaiah used beautiful, lush images of God’s bringing of new life. Water gushing forth in the wilderness places. Deserts bursting with flowers. Burning sands becoming cool oases. A broad and safe highway opening up through the fearful and dangerous wilderness. The desert places, the fear-filled wastelands we find ourselves in can suddenly erupt with new life.

One day I had experienced a very difficult time and was thrown back hard upon my inward journey, struggling with feelings of inadequacy, failure, and generally beating up on myself. That afternoon I was down at the Festival Center working out my dismal mood by stripping and waxing the floor in the children’s room. Waiting for the floor to dry, I went to the chapel to scrape paint from the window, getting it ready for the stained glass piece we have commissioned in memory of Bev Cosby. Suddenly I was startled by soft noises at the doorway of the chapel. Josh and Malike, two boys from the Saturday children’s program, had sneaked in on me and were delighted to have scared me. We went into the other room, had cookies and juice and chatted about school and other things. After a while, I told them I had to get back to the floor I was working on. They respectfully stood and put on their coats, saying cheerfully that they would see me Saturday. As they left, I realized that the whole landscape of my inner life had changed. Flowers and springs were blooming and gushing all over the desert I had been in. The pain of my inward struggle hadn’t brought this on but did prepare me to receive something beyond myself, which came in the form of two eight year-old prophets of good news. That’s how it happens. We do our inward journey work, cultivating patience with self, others, and the particular thing God has called us to do. And suddenly, God brings some sort of harvest, some bursting forth of the kingdom. Somehow the whole process, the whole journey, as hard as it can be, has this joy about it. The joy comes from a growing faith that God is indeed continual working with us and the world to bring new life.

Let us pray:

God, the message of this Advent and Christmas season is that you come to us bringing new life, healing, wholeness, peace. Help us by your Spirit to cultivate the patience that comes from that knowledge and to work with ourselves, others, and the missions to which you call us with a joy deeper than all the struggles and fears we experience along the way.

Amen.