
Waiting with Patience

[Listen to the podcast.](#)

A Sermon by the Reverend Canon Elizabeth Knowlton
Advent 3 a
James 7:7-10 & Matthew 11:2-11

A number of years ago, the Washington Post decided to do a bit of a social experiment. Aware of the frenetic pace of the morning rush hour at a typical Metro station, they decided to see if they could make people stop their rushing and listen. So at 7:51 a.m. they placed a violinist at L'Enfant plaza for 43 minutes. He performed six classical pieces and 1,097 people passed by.

Each passerby had a quick choice to make, one familiar to commuters in any urban area where the occasional street performer is part of the cityscape: Do you stop and listen? Do you hurry past with a blend of guilt and irritation? Do you throw in a buck, just to be polite? Does your decision change if he's really bad? What if he's really good?

They decided to have Joshua Bell, an internationally acclaimed virtuoso be the performer. A few weeks ago he had played to a sold out crowd in Boston where people had paid over \$100 a ticket, and that wasn't even for the best seats. He also has a rather nice instrument, it is a Stradivarius valued at over 3.5 million dollars.

Joshua Bell was game to dress in rather nondescript clothes, station himself in a corner and play with his case open at his feet.

Before the experiment they interviewed the director of the National Symphony and asked for his prediction. Leonard Slatkin said, even assuming that Mr. Bell would not be recognized, there would still be many people who would stop. That a crowd would gather and that his talent and the beauty he was offering would be enough to stop commuters in their tracks.

But that is not what happened. In fact it took six minutes into a most challenging work by J.S. Bach for the first person to pause. As you review the video, there is never a crowd.

My favorite part is when a preschooler tries to get their very hurried mother to stop. The mom is walking briskly and, therefore, so is the child. She's got his hand.

"I had a time crunch," recalls Sheron Parker, an IT director for a federal agency. "I had an 8:30 training class, and first I had to rush Evvie off to his teacher, then rush back to work, then to the training facility in the basement."

Evvie is her son, Evan. Evan is 3. You can see Evan clearly on the video. He's an African American child in a parka, and he keeps twisting around to look at Joshua Bell, as he is being propelled toward the door. "There was a musician," Parker says, "and my son was intrigued. He wanted to pull over and listen, but I was rushed for time."

So Parker does what she has to do. She deftly moves her body between Evan's and Bell's, cutting off her son's line of sight. As they exit the arcade, Evan can still be seen craning to look. When Parker is told what she walked out on, she laughs.

"Evan is very smart!" I think Evan is smart, but I suspect Evan is also patient. "Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near."

Now, most of us don't often think of three year olds as patient. We think of their plaintive cries from the back seat of a car demanding to know when we will arrive somewhere. We think of our horror when we approach an airport waiting area with children in tow, knowing that we will be engaged in an attempt to keep them occupied until the plane takes off. We think of standing in an endless line at Disney World to see their favorite character jammed into oversized costume--only to see them going on their break as we approach the head of the line. But in all of those scenarios, the person who usually loses it first and screams in frustration, "I just need you to be patient," is not the child. It is us.

Patience as a theological virtue is in scarce supply. As a culture we seem to have an unreasonable fear of becoming bored, even for an instant. We have legions of hand held electronic devices that entertain us if we are unfortunate enough to find ourselves waiting. If I am stuck in traffic or waiting at the grocery store, I can still receive that critical e-mail from Amazon that lets me know what item I have purchased in the past has just gone on sale.

We hate to wait. And the more we structure our lives to avoid waiting, the less patient we become. The letter of James is not exhorting us to a life free of boredom. Rather we are being exhorted to a life of attentiveness. Patience as a theological virtue is about being open to the coming of the Lord in unexpected places. And that's why the three year olds have a leg up on us. They are not formed to think that a concert virtuoso can only be present in a concert hall. They are not so pressed by their appointment calendar that they have become unaware of their surroundings.

We often talk about Advent being a season of waiting, but we don't often make the link to how we wait. We think about getting through. We light our candles, pry the chocolate candies each day out of the advent calendar, and count the days until Christmas. But the quality of our waiting is important. The quality of our waiting is directly related to what we are likely to see. Will we see the Messiah in front of us, or be so limited in our expectations that we might as well be in prison like John the Baptist.

I have often heard John's question, "Are you the one to come or are we to wait for another?" as primarily a question grounded in doubt. Poor John. He's lost his spiritual mojo. No longer is he the confident prophet screaming at us to repent and get ready for the Lord. He's unexpectedly stuck in prison and now wonders if he got it all wrong. But is that John's impatience, or our own?

Matthew tells us that it is during John's imprisonment that he has received reports of what the Messiah is doing. It is the reports of the Messiah's actions that prompt the question, not John's frustration with being stuck in a cell. So what are the actions? We don't have a laundry list, but clearly some preconceived notion of how the Messiah was supposed to act like has been challenged.

But the question, "Are you the one to come or are we to wait for another?" already represents a decision by John the Baptist. He has decided to remain open. He could have just rejected Jesus as a false messiah, and there were plenty of those running around. But his waiting has been sanctified with patience. He has allowed it to strengthen his heart and open his eyes to the coming of Messiah.

How are you waiting this Advent? Heard any good music lately?

Amen