
Be Patient

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A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh

I could tell Christmas was in the air a few weeks ago. All it took was a quick trip to Whole Foods. There, on a Saturday afternoon, all of Buckhead was trying to find a spot in the parking garage. There was chaos, horn honking and a lot of frustration. It was Whole Foods version of a labyrinth without an exit.

That image is probably how many of you feel on this Third Sunday of Advent, as you hustle from one event to another, trying to accomplish it all, while driving on wet Atlanta roads. The irony is that we come here, during this fast pace and high stress season, to hear that epistle reading from James. A passage that repeats a word many of us need to hear"" "patience." James says it over and over again in today's reading""patience, patience, and patience.

When James describes patience he uses an image that would resonate with the people of the first century. He likens patience to a farmer waiting for the early and late rains. (Perhaps, rain is not the best image for those of us living in Atlanta these past few weeks.)

The word "patience" comes from the Greek word "Makrothumon," and it means to waiting for something to arrive. Perhaps the better image for us in Atlanta is thinking back to the last time you saw people standing at the top of the escalator at Hartsfield, waiting for someone they love; their patience is being tried. Waiting can try our patience.

About five years ago, I was the associate rector at St. Paul's in Albany, GA. and remember getting a phone call early in the summer from my sister, Margaret. (I know. I have a sister and wife named Margaret, it can get confusing). My sister and I are 17 months apart. We have always been best of friends and worst of enemies. She was calling that morning to make sure I would be in Richmond, VA for the birth of her first child.

"Of course," I said, "I was planning to visit a few days after the baby was born." "That's why I am calling," she said, "I want you to come to Richmond sooner." "What about Mom and Dad?" I said, "Aren't they going to be there?" "No, they aren't coming until I am in labor. They will only make me more anxious."

Little sister was calling to make it clear that big brother needed to be present for the birth (in the waiting room, of course). So, I did as I was told. I took a few days off and drove from Albany to Richmond arriving just before her due date.

The next day we went to the doctor, fully expecting that he would induce her. Well, we were WRONG. True to his personality, baby Campbell would arrive on his own terms. The doctor said everything was fine, expect the baby at any moment, just go home and be PATIENT.

For good reasons, my brother-in-law decided to go back to work, so he could save those precious vacation days. This meant I was left home alone with my little sister, my very pregnant little sister, waiting, waiting for that unexpected moment, waiting for that unexpected hour, and we did not wait patiently, as James suggest.

The next morning my sister and I made breakfast, and then we sat there waiting, waiting, and waiting. Margaret said, "I can't sit around this house and wait, so let's go to the mall." I made her print me out directions from the mall to the hospital (just in case) and off we went.

We walked, walked and walked some more, hoping that she might go into labor. Margaret's phone was acting up, so we walked into the Verizon store. The salesman asked when she was due, and Margaret replied, "yesterday." I have never seen a grown man move so quickly. She had a new cell phone in record speed! All day we walked around that mall, waited and nothing happened.

Day two: We got up, made breakfast again, and about midmorning Margaret said, "I can't wait in this house any longer, let's go do something." It was a beautiful summer day, so she suggested I borrow her clubs and play golf. Again, we printed directions to the hospital and were on our way to the golf course!

Like old times, she insisted on driving the golf cart. I could tell her patience was running thin, it was evident by her rationale "If she drove the cart through the rough and woods searching for my golf ball she might go into labor. I sliced it off the tee as normal, and she spent the day off-roading through the rough and woods, but in the end, nothing happened!

Day three. We got up. We made breakfast and we waited. After walking miles around the mall and playing hours of golf, I didn't have the strength to embark upon another day of physical activity. Our anxiety was high, our patience was wearing, and our parents kept calling from TN wanting to get into the car; but alas, patience was needed.

We waited while watching the morning news. The news turned into Hoda and Kathie Lee, and then at noon we snapped. We lost our patience and decided to play hardball. We would force the baby's hand by making lunch reservations at an Indian Restaurant. After a two-hour lunch, I looked like the pregnant one and the baby didn't seem to be phased by the spicy Chicken Tikki Marsala.

Finally, the next morning, the wait was over. After days of waiting, my nephew was born. He was a gift worth waiting for.

James knows that we all struggle with patience. Whether it's with traffic, work, or in our relationships, we all struggle with patience. Sadly, during this Christmas season, we happen to be the most impatient with those we love "our children, spouses and parents.

And if we are impatient towards the people we love, then it is no surprise that we lack patience when it comes to our relationship with God. Why are you absent? Why are you not responding to my prayers? Where have you been? Why have you let this happen?

James senses our impatience and directs us to the prophets, but there is a problem with that; the prophets are some of the most impatient people in Holy Scripture. A number of the prophets, Job, in particular, struggle with having patience.

That is why in the final verse of today's epistle James uses a different Greek word to describe the patience of Job and the other prophets. The word is "hupomone," it means endurance, steadfast faith, trusting in God, amidst all the changes and uncertainties of this life.

Yes, like Job, and the rest of humankind, we will lose our patience; the changes and uncertainties of life will occasionally knock us off our feet, but let us never lose our endurance, our steadfast faith, our hope in God.

Christmas reminds us that God does not forsake us. God seeks us. God longs for us. God desires us. God desires us so much that God is born among us. The child shall be called Emmanuel, God with us.

That message is the song that fills the air this time of year. We sing about a God "born to set thy people free." It is a song that "strengthens our hearts," as James would say.

More than patience, James wants us to have Hupomone (endurance / steadfast faith); that occurs when we make the holy song of this season a melody that is heard at every moment of our lives.

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