

“Patience, While We Wait”

Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39

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Memorial UMC, Thomasville, NC

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You’ve heard about the person who prayed for patience in these words: “O God, I need patience. And give it to me NOW!” I guess you’ve also heard that there is no such thing as preaching patience into people unless the sermon is so long that they have to practice patience while they listen ...and wait, and wait, and wait until it ends! Well, I decided I would spare you the lab setting and the temptation to experiment with a really long sermon this morning, but I will preach about “Patience, While We Wait”, because I believe there is a word from God for all of us in that well known text from Isaiah 40, verse 31: *They who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

A new Long Range Planning Committee for Memorial had its first meeting on January 17 and the second meeting will be tomorrow night. During the past two weeks the members were asked to think and pray about the following question: What three things do you see in your dream church for Memorial 5-10 years from now? Tomorrow night we will hear the members’ responses. This is the beginning of a discerning process as the group listens and looks for God’s guidance and direction.

The long range plan for our church needs to be what God wants for Memorial, not what we want. In God’s way and in God’s timing, surely God will reveal this picture of Memorial in 5-10 years time to us. In the meantime, clergy, program staff, and laity serving on this committee, especially those of us who are inclined to be impatient, will have to learn to wait. The people who like to fix things quickly and prefer a process that leads directly to an implementation phase may find this committee frustrating at times. What I do know from previous experience is that it is unwise and premature to move ahead to begin to execute long range plans without a consensus in the committee and support from the congregation.

Those of you who have worked closely with me have no doubt observed that I can be both patient and impatient. There is a part of me that at times makes me want to throw my

hands up and let out a scream of frustration; there is another, hopefully, more disciplined part of me that forces me to read and to take to heart the Old Testament scripture text for today because I see in it a word for myself and, hopefully, for many of you. I don't often say this, but this week I felt led to preach a word about patience: "Patience, while we wait." Perhaps we need to hear this message – a message encouraging us to be patient in the face of some personal, vocational, relational, financial, or existential challenge in life?

The prophet we refer to as "*Deutero-*" or "*Second Isaiah*" spoke these words in Isaiah chapter 40 to the people of Judah who had returned to Jerusalem after their exile and captivity in Babylon. They were growing weary with the task of putting their lives together again. They were tired of waiting for the complete restoration of their national, communal, and religious life. They were losing their vision of what was yet to be. These are words of comfort and an appeal to trust in the Lord. The prophet faces the challenge of Judah's faintness and weariness, and answers it with statements about God's power and the strength given to those who put their trust in God.

Like us, the people of Judah wanted results. But the prophet cautions them to wait with patience while the process of restoration unfolds. God is in control and God will use their trust in him to soar above their problems like an eagle soars in the heavens above the earth. But waiting implies patience and that is usually in short supply.

Waiting is so much part of our human experience, isn't it? And how we hate it! It is hard to wait for others to produce answers, solutions, results, or actions, let alone to wait for God. It is hard not to interrupt, not to cut the other person off, not to explode. It is hard to curb the forces within us that would hurry, hurry, hurry. It is hard to hush the frenzied voices of rebellion. It is hard to still the frantic and usually futile impulses that would result only in hurt feelings and unnecessary distress. It is hard not to tell others and God what we want, why we want it, how we want it, and when we want it. Perhaps the hardest lesson in life is to learn patience while we wait. I wonder why this is. Does it have something to do with the fact that there are times when the hardest thing in the world is to do *nothing*?

Life teaches us that there are times when the *only* thing to do is nothing. There are some things we can work for; there are other things we can only wait for. We can work for a living; we can only wait for the Spring ...although some of us are inclined to think that Spring is

already here. Life is composed of both activity and passivity. I observe that many of us are becoming experts in activity while we continue to be novices in passivity. We seem to have turned everything around because in our Judeo-Christian heritage there is a primary place for passivity – the mood in which the soul is receptive to God’s power and responsive to God’s intimations. Who will renew their strength? Those who do, and do, and do? No, according to the prophet, *They who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.*

Waiting on God, being passive, exercising patience: this is the sign of one who trusts, and this is the way towards renewal of God’s power and strength. Those who trust in their own strength and go, and go, and go, will grow weary. They will eventually faint with exhaustion. Those who wait on God will find inner resources to soar like eagles. The key to renewal is waiting.

Many of us know nothing, or at best, very little, about spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical renewal because we have not met the one and only condition of waiting on God – *patience*. Patience, while we wait on God. Now here’s a difficult road for us to travel!

Two brief points about the Christian understanding of patience to help us along the journey of patience, and then a description of what the prophet meant by “waiting”, then a prayer and our closing song.

First, the Christian understanding of patience is **purposeful patience**. Look again at Christian history, at the story of the early church, and notice how those who were enemies of the Christian faith were amazed by the purposeful patience of the early followers of Christ. Those who persecuted the early Christians did not know how to deal with such unheard of patience and persistence. They stood amazed that the first martyrs did not die grimly but died singing. As one martyr smiled in the flames, they asked him what he found to smile at there. “I saw the glory of God,” he said, “and I was glad.”

The biblical view of patience while waiting on God is that patience has a purpose. Christ asks us to wait and watch for God’s purpose to unfold . . . for things to happen in God’s good time. Underlying our patience let there be found a deep abiding sense of purpose; let there be found an unswerving and constant trust in God’s control, God’s provision, and God’s plan for our individual lives and for the life of our church – no matter how hard the way. That’s the first thing.

Secondly, a Christian view of patience is that it is **victorious patience**. In other words, patience conquers things, or patience triumphs. It is that quality that makes a person able, not simply to suffer things, but also to vanquish them. Victorious patience may entail a struggle of the mind, of the emotions, of one's faith to get to the place of victory.

One of the greatest biblical characters associated with patience is Job. In spite of all his passionate arguments with his so-called religious friends, and in spite of the agonizing questioning which tore at his heart, he never lost his faith in God. "Though God slay me, yet will I trust God," Job said. And again, "My witness is in heaven, and my record is on high." Or, "I know that my Redeemer lives."

The very greatness of Job lies in the fact that in spite of every kind of adversity, he never lost his grip on faith and his grip on God. Job's is no groveling, unquestioning submission. Job struggled and questioned, and sometimes even defied, but the flame of faith was never extinguished in his heart.

With God's help you can reflect this victorious patience in your life. You can triumph over the adverse things that you have wished away for so long. If you have patience while you wait on God . . . if you have a determination - unhasting and unresting, unhurrying and yet undelaying - which goes steadily on, and which refuses to be deflected . . . then obstacles will not daunt you, delays will not depress you, disappointments will not take your hope and faith away. Your patience will be victorious; it will win in the end. It will beat the doubt and sorrow and disaster and bring you to the other side still holding on with a faith and trust renewed, stronger, lasting, and undisturbed.

Finally, a word about waiting in this fortieth chapter of Isaiah. "They who wait upon the Lord . . ." The Hebrew word translated here to "wait" means "to bind together by twisting." That is an insightful and very descriptive definition. Much better than our translation "to wait" because it describes the unique relationship between the Lord God and his people who walk by faith. Isaiah pictures workers in the fields picking up cords of hemp or flax and then pulling and twisting them together, one after another until they have created a strong braided rope or cable. They pulled the hemp and wrapped it around other pieces of hemp to form a strong rope.

That's what it is like when you wait on God and renew your strength. You are twisted and stretched in order to become strong. God wraps his strength around your strand of life to

give you a cable-like strength. You exchange your weakness for God's strength. And what is more, God wraps the strength of others around your strand of life. Your life is braided with the lives of God's people to make your life strong so that it may cope with the pulling and stretching of life. In this way, with God's strength and the strength of others wrapped around our lives we can live above the chances, the changes, and the challenges of life. We are never told to go in our own strength. We are told to be strong in the Lord and to be strong together. Listen . . . There is good news for the weary, the worn, and the faint: We can have the strength of an eagle to soar above the things that daunt and distress us.

All this because we wait patiently on the Lord. Would you remember one thing: in this fast-moving world of ours, would you remember that the words "patience" and "waiting" imply a slow-moving process. This may be an important lesson for individuals and for this congregation to learn. What may it mean? Instead of the hasty word, patience may mean silence. Instead of grabbing, patience may mean waiting to receive. Instead of looking for a break or a change, patience may mean a reassessment of present circumstances. Instead of doing, patience may mean being. Instead of grumbling, patience may mean praying. If we slowed down and learned to be patient while we wait we would grow stronger spiritually – more bound to the Lord and more meshed together in love. Patience while we wait means slow, steady growth.

Let us pray:[*Slow Me Down, Lord* –attributed to W.A. Peterson]

*Slow me down Lord
Ease the pounding of my heart
by the quieting of my mind.
Steady my hurried pace
with a vision of the eternal march of time.
Give me amid the confusion of the day,
the calmness of the eternal hills.
Break the tension of my nerves and muscles
with the soothing music of the singing streams*

that live in my memory.

Help me to know the magical restoring power of sleep.

Teach me the art of taking minute vacations,

Of slowing down to look at a flower,

to chat with a friend,

to pat a dog,

to read a few lines of a good book.

Slow me down Lord

and inspire me to send my roots

deep into the soil of life's enduring values

that I may grow toward the stars of my greater destiny. AMEN.