

December 29, 2019 – Isaiah 63:7-14, Galatians 4:4-7, Matthew 2:13-23

“Patience is a virtue... and a virtue won't hurt you.” As my family, sitting in the back, knows well, this was a saying of my father's as we were growing up. One that I've recently found myself saying to my daughter from time to time. Patience is a virtue and a virtue won't hurt you.

It's true though. Patience is a virtue. The Book of Proverbs tells us that the best way to persuade someone of anything is with patience and a soft tongue. King Solomon further declares in the Book of Ecclesiastes that those who are patient in spirit are better than those who are proud in spirit. King David exhorts us repeatedly in the Psalms to wait with patience. And St Paul lists patience as one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

Patience is a virtue. And virtues don't hurt us. Which is exactly why patience doesn't come easily to us. Virtues are always good and holy and useful. But they never, ever come easily. It's a core proof of our sinful nature. The better something is for us, the harder it is to do. The more holy and righteous an action is, the less naturally it comes to us.

And this is just as true for a five year old who wants a snack as an adult who's waiting for an injury to heal. And it's especially true when we are waiting on the Lord. When King David tells us in the Psalms to wait with patience, it's to wait with patience on God's deliverance. When St Paul tells us in the Epistles that patience is a gift of the Holy Spirit, it is patience to wait for the day of the Lord's return.

Thankfully, the Lord does not simply leave us to our own devices in this regard. He knows our sinful, impatient hearts. He knows that we will never learn patience simply by having expressions like “Patience is a virtue and virtue won't hurt you,” shouted at us. And so, instead, he gives us Matthew's Gospel.

With a new church year comes a new cycle of Scripture readings. Last year's Gospel lessons tended to lead us through Luke's Gospel. This year's will lead us through Matthew's. And, like all the evangelists, Matthew's Gospel has some distinct characteristics.

You see, Matthew was a strong Jew. He was a Levite. Part of the Jewish tribe designated to become priests. We don't know exactly what happened in Matthew's past, but two elements seem to be true. First, that even if he never became a full priest, he at least got some pretty extensive theological training. And second, that somewhere along the line, Matthew's life goes off the tracks, because he doesn't end up a priest. He ends up a tax collector.

Whatever the case, Matthew knows scripture. He knows the Old Testament. He knows it backwards and forwards, inside and out. And, in particular, he knows the prophets. And Matthew's Gospel is a near constant string of pointing out one prophecy after another that Jesus fulfills. We have three in today's reading alone:

*“This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” ... Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: “A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.” ... And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.*

Matthew is almost bludgeoning us with the fulfillment of prophecy. But there's a point to it all. Because there is no better way to have faith in God's mercy and to see His love at work than to look at his trustworthiness and faithfulness to His people.

Isaiah knew that. It's the very core of our Old Testament reading today. *“I will recount the steadfast love of the Lord, the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord has granted us, and the great goodness to the house of Israel that he has granted them according to his compassion, according to the abundance of his steadfast love.”*

I will recount the steadfast love of the Lord. That's the bedrock of Isaiah's faith. Counting all the acts of God's steadfast love and mercy throughout history. A steadfast love that was so strong that God was afflicted every time they were afflicted. A steadfast love that led him to carry his people all the days of old.

A steadfast love that stuck with his people even when they dealt falsely with him. Even when they broke their covenants and lied and betrayed their Lord. Even when he wanted to turn and be Israel's enemy, he couldn't. In the end, he had mercy on them anyway. Because it was just too important to him to keep his promises.

And when Israel starts to stray from God's path for them, what is Isaiah's solution: recall the days of old. Recall all that he did to guide Moses and the Israelites to the Promised Land. You can't help but feel God's love when you see all that he does to fulfill his promises.

And so as blunt as Matthew is about this, he's really picking up a very old theme. You wanna know the love of God? Look at how he fulfills his promises. You think that God has abandoned you? Then ask yourself, has he ever abandoned his people before? Watch for him. Wait for him. Have some patience for Him. And he will do great things.

St Paul describes this as waiting for the fullness of time. Every prophecy that had ever been given. Every patriarch, judge, and king that had ever come before. Every story of God's steadfast love. They were all drops into a cup that was just waiting to be filled.

And when it was full, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might be adopted as His sons. Just as He had always planned. Just as He had always said He would.

And that can be a great burden for us... or a great comfort. Job says at one point during his trials and tribulations, "*What is my strength, that I should wait? And what is my end, that I should be patient?*" Essentially, Job was saying, "I can have the strength wait, as long as I know what I'm waiting for. I can be patient, as long as I know there's an end to the patience coming someday."

If we focus only on the waiting, only on the patience, then yes, waiting on the Lord can be a terrible burden. Because, to be blunt, we have a tendency to act like little children demanding a snack. Frustrated drivers sitting in a traffic jam. Angry customers waiting in line at the customer service counter. The waiting is terrible. But the reward at the end is great.

Give God a day and he can create light from darkness. Give God three days and he can create life from death. Give God a week and he can create the entire universe. Give God 2,000 years... and no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no human mind has conceived of the things God has prepared for those who love him.

That is the message he leaves for us. "I led my people out of years of slavery in Egypt and brought them safely to the promised land of Israel. I led my people out of years of sin and oppression and brought them safely to the promised land of salvation by my Son. I will lead my people out of the pain and suffering and sin and sorrow of this mortal life and bring them safely to the promised land of a new creation. You have my promise of that."

We've seen a glimpse of what God does for his people. We have seen the fulfillment of prophecy in Jesus Christ. We have seen the steadfast love of God poured out on the cross. We have seen the great reward that awaits us all in Christ's resurrection.

We've seen that there is no promise more trustworthy than His. So watch for him. Wait for him. Have a little patience for him. Patience is a virtue. And this virtue will definitely not hurt you. Amen.