December 15th, 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Advent III

10:30 am

Patience is a Virtue

1. Patience is a Virtue

I remember as a small child, especially as holidays drew near or I was expectantly and hopefully waiting on something to arrive, I would whine. The whine of most children, “Are we there yet?”, “Is it time?”, “When are we going?” and a bunch of other questions that I imagine most parents can hear ringing in their ears. You know the questions well. And then my mother would occasionally turn to me and say, “Patience is a virtue.” It’s unlikely that I even knew what a virtue was, but what I did know was that patience was something to be desired.

We are really in a space of waiting, not only in our church year as we await Christ’s coming, but we as a world are in a place of waiting for things to change. And as I reflect upon the phrase, “Patience is a virtue”, I wonder if it really is a virtue. In some things, we do need to be patient, we can’t bring the 25th of December any closer, so patience is necessary. When it comes to birthdays, or celebrations, or a work raise, we are to work hard and to be patient. Yet, as I look around the world, where there are injustices, acts of oppression, and unkind words shared between enemy lines, I wonder if patience pushes us into complacency.

One of the greatest challenges that I see as a preacher is trying to encourage you to really breathe in this Christmas as if it was the first Christmas you had ever known - to be childlike, to look with awe and joy upon a tree, to be mesmorized by the lessons and carols. The truth is, you know what will happen on the 25th, it happens every year, and how am I, how should I, pretend that you don’t? The same feelings swirl around Easter time, when we walk the Lenten journey, but we know the ending, we know the ending of the story, the bright resurrection day.

Maybe patience is a virtue, but maybe it isn’t – maybe patience pushes us into complacency, into apathy, into a space where we just consider the coming of a newborn King to be par normal in our lives. By the time we hit December 26th, we’re just tired and snuggled up on a sofa, knowing that decorations will need to be stored and put away until next year. Maybe the call is to be impatient, maybe love, peace, joy, and hope cannot wait another day.

1. James

Perhaps this idea stands in direct opposition at first to our

reading today from the Letter of the James. Yet before I can dig deeper with you, this is a letter that we don’t touch upon often, so I feel the need to give you a bit of a background to work with as we explore this idea of patient impatience.

This letter was put into the Bible in the third century, but we almost missed out on it because Martin Luther had some theological quibbles about it, but if you read the letter, James has some impassioned practical concerns that are helpful as we face modern day problems. Some folks think James, the brother of Jesus, wrote the text, some do not, but we can say that we’re pretty sure it comes from an early Palestinian origin. The letter has moral exhortations, both traditional and eclectic and James has a particular focus on these two opposing ideas: God’s perfect righteousness and the corrupt and selfish ways of the world.

I think it’s pretty fair to say that while the issues in his context may have changed, that constant dynamic continues to arise: God’s will and the world’s ways. James is trying to charge us in really reconnecting with a moral and ethical thread as we serve Christ.

1. James II

So, that’s a bit about the letter, which again, is important to understand if you want to get some traction on our reading from today. The verses that run up to our short passage are dealing with wage theft – where the rich have lived on the earth in luxury and pleasure. Again, not so different from the problems we see today. And then James dares to ask us, the people of God, to be patient...to be strong...to await God’s reign. That’s a heck of a tall order, especially as time passes.

I think it can be easily misread that James is calling us to patient complacency, but rather, I think James is pointing to a patience that points to hope – that points us to something more. He’s almost saying – you can’t save the world in one day, you have to be patient – but you can’t stop trying either and strengthening your heart and spirit and will to do the same.

1. Gaudete Candle

Now, with James’ moral ethics in mind, today, we light the

pink candle, which is also called the Gaudete candle, which means ‘Rejoice’ in Latin. The rose colored candle reminds us to rejoice, to hope, to await the newborn king, not with complacency, but with a hope that is renewed daily. There is to be a lightness, a freshness, a new sense of breathing in the word. In your patience, may there be hope, a joyful, abundant hope.

A writer, Celeste Kennel-Shank, puts it this way, “Maybe hope is as basic as refusing to give up and sell out. Hope is continuing to be the hands and feet in the world, even when the odds are against us. Hope is openness to transformation, listening and looking for signs of God’s action happening all around us, just like Jesus told John’s disciples to tell John. Hope is trust in the character of our God as one who brings justice to the oppressed, not just tomorrow but today. Hope is knowing that God acts in human history for liberation and restoration. We only need the eyes to see it and ears to hear it.”

1. The Challenge

The challenge this week is no easier than the last, perhaps

harder in it’s own way. Last week I asked you to find five tangible signs of hope at work in the world. This week, I call you to joy in the waiting. As we try to patiently wait, how can you still gain an understanding of truly being grateful, with a kind of enthusiasm that mimics a young child.

Hope and joy are entrenched together, for when we experience hope, we are able to feel joy. This week, may you choose joy – not naïve joy, where you smile regardless of what is happening. But pure joy, in the midst of sorrow, in the midst of despair, it is joy that fortifies us, that strengthens us, that prepares us to hear the story of Christ coming into this world. Find joy. May it be simple, may it be pure. Find joy in hugging a family member close, in writing to a friend, in seeing the candles lit in household windows, in the laughter of children. Find joy. And in that joy, may that joy inspire to you to patient impatience, where joy and love and peace and hope cannot wait another day and where we work towards a world where God’s joy reigns forever and ever. Alleluia, amen.