

## “Waiting patiently”

*Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-11 (December 11, 2022)*

Are you a patient person? I only ask because there are times when I am not. Patience is said to be one of the fruits of God’s Spirit: “Love, joy, peace, *patience* ...” So if we live by the Spirit, then patience should be one of those things that characterize our lives. But it’s not always there, is it?



When’s the last time you found yourself in a waiting room? In the doctor’s office, waiting for the receptionist to call your name? You arrived early, but the doctor was called out. And now everything is way behind. How long will it be?

Or you’re waiting at the airport. But your flight has been delayed. The weather is bad. And there are problems with the plane. It’s late at night and you’ve already been there several hours. The seats are so uncomfortable. You’re bored, you’re hungry, you’re tired. You just want to get to your destination. How long will it be?

How long, O Lord? Advent is a time of waiting. Waiting for the celebration of Christmas – it’s just 14 days now. Do you think you will be able to manage?

But more than that, Advent is waiting for the coming of Christ. Waiting for his kingdom to arrive in all its fullness. Waiting for the promise of God to be fulfilled. What God began in the life and ministry of Jesus ... when will it be completed? How long will it take? Some of the authors of the New Testament seemed to think it would unfold very quickly. But here we are, two thousand or so years later, and we’re still waiting.

In this Advent season we’ve been given visions from the prophet Isaiah. Great soaring dreams of a world transformed. Like this morning’s passage from Isaiah 35: “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom ... the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.” (Isaiah 35:1,7)



Photo by JIP,  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Waiting\\_room\\_in\\_Module\\_D\\_of\\_Terminal\\_1\\_at\\_Munich\\_Airport.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Waiting_room_in_Module_D_of_Terminal_1_at_Munich_Airport.jpg)



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Here’s a picture of the Judean wilderness. Does this landscape look transformed to you? Does it show any sign of life? Is it rejoicing and singing?

When we think of the wilderness of our weary war-torn world, or even the dry desert places of our own individual lives, are we not *still* waiting for this promised restoration to wholeness, this verdant greening of our lives? When will it be? How long must we continue to wait?



Advent is about waiting. It’s a season that reminds us of God’s great promise. But it also reminds us that this world is not yet made new. We see the brokenness, the darkness, the pain, the sorrow, the grief. And we long for something better. How long, O Lord? How long!

Waiting isn't easy. Especially in our culture of instant everything. But in this morning's reading from the book of James, we find some helpful advice. "Be patient," he says. "Be patient, beloved, until the coming of the Lord."

Advent is an opportunity for us to practice this patience. But how do we go about such a strange and counter-cultural thing? The answer may surprise you!



James points to the biblical character of Job as one who had patience. Do you remember Job's story? It was said of him that he "was the greatest of all the people of the east." (Job 1:3) But one day the tempter said to God: "It's *easy* for Job to be faithful. He has everything a person could want. What if all these things were taken from him? I bet he wouldn't be so faithful then!"

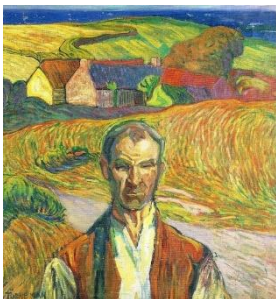
So, God allowed those blessings to be stripped away. One by one they disappeared in a string of disasters that left poor Job with nothing. Not even his own health was spared.

The book of Job is 40 chapters long. And only in the last seven verses do we learn that his blessings have been restored. What fills the intervening chapters? Complaint, protest, argument! There are agonizing pleas for God to listen to the prayers of his servant. Chapter upon chapter of theological wrestling with the problem of evil: How can a good and loving God allow such things to happen?

We're not the first to ask such questions, you see. When we think of our world and its awful suffering, we're not the first to wonder – are you there Lord? Are you listening? Do you care?

Job's waiting is full of passionate protest against injustice. He wrestles with what it means to be God's servant in a world that seems so far from God's desire.

What I'm trying to say is our Advent waiting is not sitting *quietly*. It's not hoping for something to happen while we twiddle our thumbs, and watch the clock, and check for messages on our phone. No, the patience James speaks of is more than that.



Farmer in Brittany by Axel Torneman, 1905.

James points us to another example: that of a farmer. Some of you have farmed, while others have planted gardens. Did you just stand around waiting for plants to magically appear?

No, you tilled the soil to make it receptive. You planted seeds, hoping they would grow. You applied fertilizer at the right time. When weeds came up, you pulled them out so those plants would have a chance at survival.

A farmer does everything he or she can do to ensure an abundant harvest. But there are things outside of our control. Patience is learning to live in that tension – between what we can do and what we cannot do.

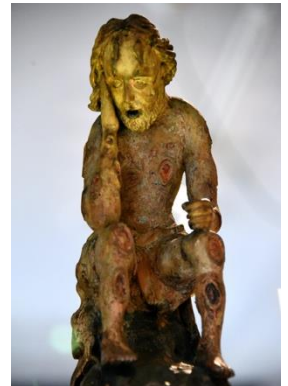


Photo by Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin FRCP(Glasg), [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carved\\_wooden\\_figure\\_of\\_Job\\_Probably\\_from\\_Germany,\\_1750-1850\\_CE.\\_The\\_Wellcome\\_Collection,\\_London.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carved_wooden_figure_of_Job_Probably_from_Germany,_1750-1850_CE._The_Wellcome_Collection,_London.jpg)

It's like that prayer, well-known in some circles. It was composed in 1933 and passed down in various ways through the years. Here it is in its original form: "Father, give us courage to change what must be altered, serenity to accept what cannot be helped, and the insight to know the one from the other."<sup>1</sup> We call it the Serenity prayer.

There are times the church is called to action. We speak, we work, we pray. We wrestle with the darkness that stands in the way of God's kingdom. And we seek to bring God's light and love to our neighbours.

But we also realize there are things we cannot do. Just as the farmer cannot control the weather or prevent every kind of deadly disease. There are limitations. We are *not* God. We are farmers, given the task of tending the seeds that God has planted. We do all we can to encourage them to grow. But we have the serenity to accept when we can do no more. The farmer waits with patience.



James instructs us to be patient with one another. "Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged."

Sometimes, when we're forced to wait, we get irritated. Have you noticed?

You're sitting in that waiting room and there's that other person across from you, doing the most annoying thing. And over time it starts to grate on you. Especially if you've been waiting there for hours. And maybe you're hungry. And you're anxious to get out of that place and on with your day.



Why does God give us such trials to endure? Why must we live with people like this? If only we could pick and choose the ones we are waiting with!

Patience means loving our neighbour. Learning to live in community with one another: Church, neighbourhood, nation and world.

I worry sometimes that we're losing this sort of patience. That we're finding it harder to live together. That we're more easily irritated, more driven to criticism. More quickly divided, neighbour against neighbour, brother against sister. But James tells us to practice patience. Care for one another. Patience means loving our neighbour.



And trusting that God will act. Because ultimately, it's not you or I who will bring in the Reign of God. It is *God's* kingdom after all. It is God, our creator and redeemer, who acts in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to restore our lives and gift us with a world made new.

We cannot do this by ourselves. Life is a gift, given to us by God. But sometimes it can be a long time coming.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serenity\\_Prayer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serenity_Prayer)



Martin Luther King Jr., the great preacher and activist for civil rights, once said: “The arc of the moral universe is long. But it bends toward justice.” The road ahead may be difficult. But the moral arc of God curves inexorably toward what is right.

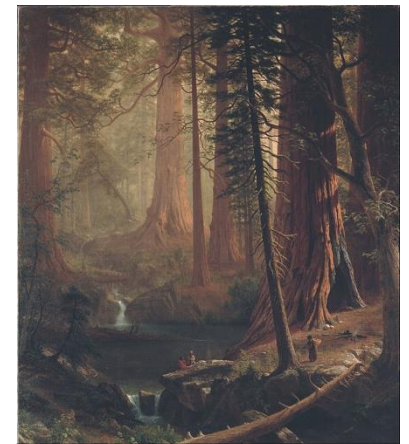
Evil will not prevail. In the *short term* it may seem to be winning. But it will not win the battle. When we think of the reign of God, we aim for the *long term*.

These visions we’ve been reading from the book of Isaiah, they give us a glimpse into a future promised by God. They help us to see a world that we can hardly imagine. A world that is not the world we live in now. A world we aim for. And work for. And wait for.



There’s a poem by Wendell Berry called “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front.” In part of that poem he tells us to: “Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.”

This is a painting of a giant sequoia grove. They are the most massive trees on earth. They grow naturally on the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada mountain range in California. They’re among the oldest living organisms on earth. They can be more than 3,000 years old! But they are an endangered species.



Giant Redwood Trees of California,  
by Albert Bierstadt

Plant *those* trees, says Berry. Invest in the millennium.

“Say that your main crop is the forest  
that you did not plant,  
that you will not live to harvest.  
Say that the leaves are harvested  
when they have rotted into the mold. ...  
Put your faith in the two inches of humus  
that will build under the trees  
every thousand years.”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, think *past* the immediate. See beyond what is right now. Pay attention to the *long* term. Put your energy into that, even if you never live to see the final result. God’s purpose unfolds in a frame of time that is much *larger* than the little, tiny, spec of our lives.

Living with patience means putting our trust in God’s promise. And living for a kingdom we cannot always see. “Faith,” writes the author of Hebrews, “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” We greet them from a distance. We see them from afar. We desire a better country. (Hebrews 11:1-16)



We live with patience, trusting that God will keep God’s promise in God’s good time. Only God knows when God’s kingdom will finally come.

<sup>2</sup> <https://cals.arizona.edu/~steidl/Liberation.html>

In the mean time we *persevere*. To be patient means we keep on going. We endure. We don't give up.



I'm reminded of this famous poster from World War Two: "Keep calm and carry on." It was meant to raise the morale of the British public when they were threatened with air attacks on major cities.

Lindsay's parents lived through that time. They speak of being wakened in the night and dragged out of their beds. Their parents had dug a shelter in the back yard. So that's where they would spend the night while the bombers droned above them.

Keep calm and carry on. Those were fearful times! But they *did* carry on. What else could they do? What else can any of us do?

When the world seems to be falling apart, we continue to live for things that matter. We aim for the kingdom. We follow the way of Jesus. We live by faith. We *patiently* endure.



And every once in a while, I should say, we may catch a glimpse of something. A sign that the reign of God is *present* in our midst. We see those little green shoots that spring up from the earth in the most unexpected places.

In fields and gardens. In peoples lives as well. In neighbourhoods. In families. In churches too. We see love and goodness. We see God's care for the poor and the weak and the young and the elderly and those are too often cast aside.



Photo by Ritzyroorythmes,  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/  
File:Wadi\\_Rum\\_in\\_Flower.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wadi_Rum_in_Flower.jpg)

We see peace breaking out among us. We see new life coming to the dry, parched and thirsty land. We see God's renewal at the very moment when, deep inside, we had almost given up.

We may not see that *full scale* transformation that we hope for. How long, O Lord? We do not know. But we wait for it with patience.



Oh yes, there's just one more thing I should remind you of. And that is *God's* enduring patience toward us!

Somehow, God puts up with the mess we make of God's good and beautiful world. With our disorder and disobedience. With the wasting of our lives and squandering of God's great and wonderful gifts.

Somehow the harm we cause the world and one another and even ourselves does not *deter* God. God is not easily swayed from God's good purpose. God keeps on loving us. As much as when he sent the Son to be our Saviour.

God *loves* the world. God loves you and me. The apostle Paul says that he was shown mercy, so that in him, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his *immense patience* as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life." (1 Timothy 1:16)



“Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.” We act when we can. When we cannot act, we wait. We care for one another always. And we put our trust in the great long-term promise of God.

We wait *patiently*.