

January 19 Waiting Patiently?

Psalm 40:1-11

Most of us can read Psalm 40 and admire its words, the depth of thought and faith conveyed in its phrases. But who among us can, with any candor, say “I waited patiently for the Lord”? When did we ever wait for anything at all without frustration or anxiety? We are no good at waiting. We want to get moving, we can’t bear wasting time, and the clock is ticking while we just don’t know what will unfold next. Do you know what the most pushed button in an elevator is? You guessed it, the “door closed” button. We can’t wait for those doors to close so we can get where we want to go. Patience is listed by Paul as a “fruit of the Spirit,” which it must be for somebody, somewhere, but not me, or at least not yet.

How can we learn to wait in patient hope for God; especially, when we are in the condition of the one writing the poem who is in a desolate pit or a miry bog? It feels as if he is in up to his neck in troubles and yet it says he waited patiently until God set his feet upon a rock and made his steps once again secure. I want that kind of faith, don’t you?

Today I want to talk about learning the gift of patience. This is something we need to cultivate, some more than others, and at least on some days we need it more than other times. I am preaching to myself because there are those times where I must confess to needing to be blessed by the fruit of the Spirit called patience. Some of the answers to “how to grow this gift” are right here in the psalm.

It says, “Happy are those who make the Lord their trust.” Let’s admit it. When we are feeling impatient we are anything but calm. Let me share a delightful quote from Amy Gross that I found on the internet. “It was once said that anger is like drinking poison and hoping your enemy will die. Impatience is similarly ridiculous. You’re in a rush, a salesperson is moving in slow motion, and you’re ready to kill. The problem is, the person you’re torturing is your own pitiful self: Your nerves are shredding, stress hormones are streaking through your body, and your heart’s racing with scenarios of the tragedies that will ensue from being late. And you’re not accomplishing a thing. Your

frenzy is useless. You're trying to squirm out of the present into the future: Good luck with that. You are irrevocably and inescapably stuck in the moment—your feet are tied to it; you are a spoke in time's wheel. Writhe and holler as much as you want, you're not going anywhere. You are here. Immobile.”

Have you ever been there? You are stuck in line, you are hearing the same story for the umpteenth time, or pick your prime place of impatience. You have to choose how you are going to react in those moments. We tend to see the negatives that come with being delayed and focus on them and as the quote says, it doesn't do us any good, only harm. Happiness comes when you trust. You live into the moment, you trust God is in the moment and you let go of your schedule and thank God you have a cell phone to let people know you are going to be late. So how do you do this?

Again we can turn to the psalm. It says in verse 6 you have given me an open ear. The Hebrew is a little more colorful. The Hebrew for this “open ear” means literally “ears you have dug out for me,” as if our ears are jammed with gunk and wax, and only if God can bore it all out can we actually hear God! What fills our ears so we cannot hear God? In this context things such as schedules, fear, and worry keep us from hearing God's words to trust. When this happens as I said, we are impatient, cross and fretful. For me one of the ways that I open my ears when I am stuck in lines where all I can do is wait, is to take this time to watch the people around me. It is always highly entertaining! This is my choice instead of being impatient because I have learned that I can fuss and fume all I want and I still won't get the line to move faster so I might as well enjoy the wait!

At other times it is a little harder to open my ears. When I am, like the psalmist, up to my neck in desolation and feel like I am in a miry bog I want God to fix the situation and I want it now. There is nothing pleasant around me to take my mind off the situation. So what do I do? I pray! I pray about the situation trusting that in God's time the issue will be resolved. But even more I start praying for other people. I have learned that when I unhook from my wants and needs and instead focus on what God can do for others I begin to see how God is at work in all sorts of ways. To use the psalmist, it puts a new song in my heart.

But let's be honest, sometimes we find it almost impossible to let go of the impatience. What do you do? Here are a few tips.

Just stop the mind ranting that you shouldn't be in this situation—because you are, and settle into the moment. Instead of focusing on what you should be doing be completely present in this moment and being fully present God might provide ways for you to be in ministry. When you force yourself to stop worrying, fretting and all the rest because you acknowledge you are not in control in this situation it gets better. I am not saying it will be easy or that you will like the resolution that comes but in being open to God in that moment you can find peace and trust, no matter what.

Second, you need to go into your body with your mind's eye and find out how you know you're impatient. Are you tight, tense, breathing shallowly, clenching, jiggling? Where exactly? Focus on those sensations as closely as you can. Touch them with your mind. See if you can open any tightness, breathe into any clenching. With a really ornery knot, give up trying to fix it and see if you can welcome it, make room for it. When you do this you are saying I am in control of how I handle the situation. I am not going to let it win. That is a tremendously freeing thing. Once your brain cools down, your powers of reason return. You thank God for cell phones and call to say you'll be late. You figure out how you can make up the minutes or hours lost to traffic. You understand it's all going to be okay or at least there is a way to deal with what is happening. God will set your foot back on solid ground. Your schedule will get caught up, you will get through the trial.

The fascinating thing is that when you give up the fight, you get time. Time stretches. You sink into the moment, and it seems infinite. You have all the time in the world because you really are not going to worry about what is next. This is something I continue to learn. I am so clock driven. It is part of my DNA. In fact my family laughs at me because I get up at the same time every morning no matter when I went to sleep because the alarm clock in my head goes off. But now, when my schedule gets upset I see it as a possibility that God has something more important for me to do than what I planned and so go with it and in losing my impatience good things happen. The same is true with truly challenging things in my life. I have come to understand that my timing is

not always best so if I go with what is happening, even in the very difficult moments of time, it is always better than railing against what might be. For I then, like the psalmist see God's wondrous deed. I listen with unstopped ears and know God does not keep God's mercy from me.

In closing let me share one little instance. I had one of those meeting packed days that happens in the life of a preacher. I was literally having to go from meeting to meeting without so much as a break. Each committee chair had been told that I would be with them only so many minutes. It was a rush, rush kind of day. As I entered the next meeting I was aware that something different was going on. The group was silent and listening intently to one of their members as she shared something that had happened to her. As I sat down I have to admit that my first response was impatience. Why couldn't this wait until I was gone. But I realized this impatience and so forced myself to be quiet and to listen. I was blessed with hearing about how God had answered the prayers of this woman concerning a situation she had been struggling with for many years. The answered prayer came in a way that was surprising and encouraging. She was singing God's praises for no longer being in the miry bog. In listening I realized that this was probably the most important thing I was going to hear that day. It had nothing to do with my schedule or the working of the church but it had everything to do with our faith and God's love. I gave thanks that I had listened, really listened, and that others had set aside their agenda without impatience to hear this story.

It is for me a daily struggle but I try to wait patiently for the Lord and hope you do too.