

Fruit of the Spirit: Patience
Isaiah 54:7-10
II Peter 3:1-10

“First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts and saying, ‘Where is the promise of his coming?’”

“The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”

“I like insects for their stupidity,” writes Annie Dillard. “A paper wasp...is fumbling at the stained-glass window on my right. I saw the same sight in the same spot last Sunday: Psst! Idiot! Sweetheart! Go *around*...by the door! I hope we seem as endearingly stupid to God--bumbling down into lamps, running half-wit across the floor, banging for days at the hinge of an opened door. I hope so,” she concludes, though “it does not seem likely.” Not likely, I think, but with God all things are possible.

Possible because of all the ancient attributes ascribed to God (omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, immutability, impassibility), the one most missed by those of us impatiently trying to fly through a closed window when the door stands wide open is the attribute of God’s patience. “We define God’s patience,” wrote my favorite old theologian, “as God’s will...to allow [us]...space and time for the development of [our] own existence...That God does not suspend and destroy [us]...but accompanies and sustains [us] and allows [us] to develop in freedom” is God’s patience.

We are paper wasps, you and I. Collectively we are a hive of hits and misses who have been given the time and the space to develop this one precious life of ours in freedom. Yet our misspent days are marked by all the blind alleys we have entered confidently--convinced that this was the *only* way to go. Moreover we are hopelessly attracted to bright lights in our present darkness, invariably coming away burned and diminished by their artificial heat. We fly through open windows--*because they are open!*--and find ourselves in a vehicle going nowhere, with no obvious way out and with

fellow travelers who are annoyed at our presence. Though perhaps the most pitiable truth is that we embrace all these behaviors unaware of our folly. In fact we are downright proud of our persistence!

And lest we get lost in the metaphor, plainly put, though we may be the only sentient creatures capable of knowing our end and living in the face of death with meaning and purpose, few of us have a clue or take the time to ask why we are here or to whom we belong or where we are going because, well, we are in such a hurry to get there! So along the way, to create the illusion that we do have a clue, we settle down: establish routines, enter into relationships, secure jobs, form opinions, set goals. Then after four or five or six decades, something in us begins to wonder if this was not all a cover--as is our busyness and self-importance and impatience—for having missed the life given us by God to live. Destiny, we call it, not in the popular predestined sense that has the ring of fate to it; but in the sense of spending your life on the one thing that is worth your life. Chances are, of course, in quitting the rat race or the marriage, in embracing a lover or a new lifestyle half the distance to the grave, we do not do much more than exchange one windowpane for another!

Viewed from the perspective of the God who not only has given us the time and space and freedom to become the person we were put on earth to be, but who also upholds, sustains, directs and governs us every step of the way, it must be maddening to see us hitting our heads against the same window Sunday after Sunday; refusing the means of grace season in and season out; confusing the truth for the facts in the story of our salvation; complaining about this unfair circumstance and that almighty slight in prayer; testifying to God's absence and the Spirit's silence when the Word which entered our darkness and doubt and confusion and pain is patiently pleading for us, over and over again saying "Psst! Idiot! Sweetheart! Go *around*...by the door!"

But there is a second thing to notice about our idiocy, for in the midst of our lives headed nowhere in particular, God's patience does not strike us as something for which to be grateful. The

daily lived evidence that God does not suspend and destroy us but accompanies and sustains us is neither here nor there for us. God's patience does not come to mind as an attribute for which to be thankful when, weary from batting our head against the stained glass, we say our prayers at the end of day; nor does patience present itself as a trait to emulate when we rise at dawn to try again.

In fact if pressed, we likely would say that *we* are the ones with the patience in this relationship. "I waited patiently for the Lord," writes the psalmist, and we know what he means. We are those who have waited for God to cure an illness; waited for God to heal a broken relationship; waited for God to make the future a bit clearer; waited for God to intervene in the chaos of human history; waited for God's voice to break the silence of our prayers. Some of us have freely entered this time and this space because *we* want to hear from God *not when God gets around to us*, but now! A word, a sign, a lifting of the veil. "Through great patience, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger," we say with the apostle Paul, we have kept the faith. From the perspective of our little lives, our waiting upon God would seem to be interminable and, at times, intolerable.

Like the Israelites in the wilderness, we would prefer to worship an impatient God: a God impatient with our wandering and being lost who would find us; a God impatient with our infirmities and diseases who would heal us; a God impatient with injustice and the violence both behind closed doors and on the streets of our city who would judge the offenders; a God impatient with loves lost and great purposes foiled by human failure who would turn things to our advantage. We are like Jonah who prayed that the wrath of God be visited upon a world not going his way--an impatient prayer imploring an impatient God to act.

But apparently this is not the God we have been given to call upon. Rather the omnipotent, holy, righteous God of Gods is the God whose patience--or to use the biblical word for it--whose

long-suffering knows no end. Why? Is it because even though we are stupid, we are *endearingly* stupid and so God puts up with our not getting it? Or as the old Reformers believed and as our text avers, is this veil of tears an arena for our sanctification, giving us the time and space to grow imperceptibly and grace-fully to be more wholly ourselves, creatures made in God's image? Or maybe like a patient but powerless father, God lives in the indomitable hope that with enough time and space, with enough freedom and grace, we will one day come to ourselves and turn again toward home.

Whatever the reason, patience has marked God's every move toward us from the beginning to the end of the biblical narrative. "God never seems to weary of trying to get himself across. Word after word, he tries in search of the right word," says Fredrick Buechner. "When the Creation itself doesn't seem to say it right--sun, moon, stars, all of it--he tries flesh and blood." Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and, in their wake, the children of Israel enter forever into a covenant relationship with the God whose patience is tried by God's impatient creatures--until God tries one final Word, the Word spoken from the beginning and made flesh in the fullness of time.

"To see and hear and feel and recognize the power of God's patience," wrote Karl Barth, "means to believe in Jesus Christ." Or if you cannot quite believe in him (even though God is waiting patiently for you to take the leap), then learn of him in the flesh to know the patience that is the fruit of the Spirit. In him behold a patient Teacher who traverses miles and mountainsides with his followers until, at the end, he is left to ask, "Have you been with me all this time and still you do not understand?" In him meet a Shepherd who has pity on the crowds and, with forbearance, watches his mostly clueless disciples fumble around with excuses until a miracle is needed to feed the hungry. In him watch a Friend who responds to the cries of Martha and Mary that their brother be healed, but responds not before Lazarus has died (Jesus' patience meeting Martha and Mary's

impatience) that all might see and believe the power of God's love over this death in anticipation of his own. In him learn from a Rabbi who taught day after day on the hillsides, healing and helping and showing compassion, only to be abandoned by the crowds in the end. And finally in him see a sentient human being living in the face of death, even death on a cross, revealing life's purpose and meaning; praying with his last breath to a patient Father, "Forgive them (these paper wasps hitting the window), for they know not what they do."

The claim is this: that because God in Christ entered the time and space given us for being human in, every time and every space has been redeemed from insignificance, every moment brimming with possibility. How else, in the fullness of time, could God get word to us that the door is open, *the door is open* and all we need do, by the grace already given us, is follow him through it? There can be little doubt that patience is not exactly on our side of the divine-human encounter!

Though I must say finally that the greatest manifestation of God's patience, the most incredible challenge to God's patience century in and century out is none other than Christ's church. Here we are--with this incredible Word given into our keeping, with this message of grace and mercy and truth intended for a world broken and in pieces, with this story to be said and sung and set loose on a city shooting itself in the foot, with a Savior whose love for us knows no bounds. And what do we do but throw tantrums over ecclesial minutia, create task forces to figure out, every five years, why we exist, call meetings into the night to decide whether the bread at communion is white or wheat, mince words over absolutely nothing of consequence?

"In two thousand years," writes Dillard, "we have not worked out the kinks. We positively glorify them. Week after week we witness the same miracle: that God is so mighty he can stifle his own laughter. Week after week, we witness the same miracle: that God, for reasons unfathomable, refrains from blowing our dancing bear act to smithereens." ("That God does not suspend and

destroy [us]...but accompanies and sustains [us] and allows [us] to develop in freedom.”)

So far, this has been the case, even for the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. The reality of our lives together, lived under the amazing grace of God's patience, is that God has not and will not blow our dancing bear act to smithereens. God has given us the time and the space to do that all by ourselves! And the only reason this has not happened in the past two thousand years must be because “*the Lord is patient*, not wanting any to perish, but wanting all to come to repentance.” Therefore our hope is secured and the future of God’s people is held fast in Him who alone has borne the weight of our stupidity and loves us still. Sunday after Sunday, he watches us hit our heads on the same glass window and, Sunday after Sunday, says to us collectively, “Psst! Idiots! Sweethearts! *Go around...by the door! Follow me.*” Whatever the door and however circuitous the route around, I impatiently pray we are given grace to hear Him in the time and space given us together; to follow Him, albeit haltingly, to the ends of the earth; and to be, by his grace, those whose stupidity is endearing enough that, next Sunday, God will try again. Thanks be to God!