

Active Patience

Have you ever had to wait for something? Of course, you have. We all have. But I mean really wait. We have become so accustomed to immediate gratification. Think about it. We have most things we need, even most things we want at our immediate disposal. You can pull up to a fast food restaurant, you don't even have to get out of your car; they will bring the food to your window just about as fast as you can order it. Have you ever had to wait a couple minutes at the drive through? That's annoying isn't it? Like when the person in front of you is counting out exact change. "Come on, already. I have been waiting for 2 minutes. What is the hold up?"

Most of my waiting has to do with books. I order my books, both for work and for pleasure, from the internet. Shipping is free and the prices are usually better than buying them in regular book stores. The only downside is the wait. They send you an email estimating the date of delivery. They even give you the tracking number, so that you can follow the package on each stage of its journey to you. If it is a book I particularly need or want, I have a habit of checking several times a day; as if my impatience will somehow speed up the arrival time. "Come on, already. I have been waiting for 2 days. What is the hold up? I could have driven to the warehouse and back already!"

Most of us are horribly impatient. When we were younger my brother used to tease me when I would get impatient; he would repeat, "Patience is a virtue, Mark. Waiting is good for you. It builds character." His mocking wisdom only served to annoy me further. But sibling banter aside, my brother was right. There is something about waiting that is good for us.

As a parent, patience is a lesson I am trying to impart on my children. But it is not easy. It seems we are not born wired to wait. We have to learn how it is done. Children want immediate satisfaction. If they tell you they are hungry or thirsty, they will not wait patiently as you prepare something to eat or drink. They will begin to cry and beg. And, trust me, no matter how many times you tell them that their fuss is not helping matters, they'll persist. And so I have learned that parents who attempt to impart patience on their children are the ones who end up having their own patience tested. Yet, it is an important lesson so the struggle continues. I have even found myself repeating my brother's mantra, "Patience is a virtue. Waiting is good for you. It builds character."

Today's passage from 2 Peter is the theological equivalent to this mantra. The author of 2 Peter is responding to the impatience of some early Christians. They are tired of waiting for the Lord to return and set the world right. "Come on already. What is the hold up?" They want and expect immediate vindication for their faith. The author of 2 Peter warns them against being overly anxious: with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. Therefore, he recommends they remain both patient and vigilant.

I imagine that these early Christians were annoyed at this advice, much like I was at my brother's advice and probably like my children will be annoyed at me as they grow and our dance between patience and persistence with one another continues. Patience is not something we can impart on others simply by suggesting it. It has to be learned through endurance. Ironically, it takes time to develop true patience. One must learn, as the author of 2 Peter is suggesting, that true patience is not a passive, but active enterprise.

It is probably safe to say that this is a lesson the Christian Church is still learning. Theologian Charles Ringma writes, “Throughout many phases of the Church’s long march, [it] has encouraged an unhealthy passivity and resignation. When life was difficult or the Church was experiencing oppression, the Church encouraged its members to bear the present difficulties empowered by the promise of heaven. The suffering of the now was to be tolerated in light of the eternal freedom and wholeness in the new heaven and new earth. While it is appropriate to live in the light of eternity, it is not appropriate to embrace a fatalism regarding the present. Nor is it fitting that only the call to patience be heard. God’s reign is not simply one of patience, but also one of shalom and transformation...the Gospel calls us to an impatient patience. The message of the kingdom of God is a disturbing message calling us to love the neighbor and the enemy and to pursue peace, reconciliation and healing. Healing not simply for the individual, but also for our families, institutions and social structures.”¹

True patience is not passive, but active. It calls us, as Isaiah called the people, to prepare the way, to make a path, to carve out space and time in our lives to listen, to reflect, to hope and to pray. But who has time to do that? We are far too busy, rushing from place to place, obligation to obligation. We are far too impatient with others, with ourselves and with God.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells a story about a friend of hers from the city who came out to visit her at her new place in the country. Never having been there before and being unfamiliar with the territory, the friend predictably got lost. “These were the days before cell phones,” she writes, “so she was on her own with nothing but

¹ *Seek the Silences with Thomas Merton* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2003), 181-182.

my directions and an out-of-date map. Already an hour later than she wanted to be, she was speeding through [a little town] when she saw blue lights in her rearview mirror...Busted she pulled over to the side of the road and had her license ready when the officer arrived at her window. "I am sorry," she said... "I know I was speeding, but I've been lost for the past forty minutes and I can't find [my destination] anywhere on this map." "Well I am sorry about that too, ma'am," he said, writing her a citation, 'but what made you think that hurrying would help you find your way?'"²

Patience is a virtue. Waiting is good for us. It builds character. This is not just good advice or snappy wisdom, but it points us to a deep theological truth about where we are in our relationship with God. Isaiah says, "Prepare the way of the Lord." Well, we are not prepared. We are nowhere near ready. If the time were now, if we believed as those early Christians did that the day of the Lord was imminent, it would certainly catch us off guard and unprepared. We are so busy rushing around from one thing to another. We think to ourselves that we have enough to worry about right here, in our own lives without worrying about the world's problems, thank you very much.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer believes that we have lost the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. "We are indifferent to the message," he writes, "taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience. Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can

² *Leaving Church* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 133-134.

we recognize the incomparable kindness. God comes in the very midst of evil and of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love.”³

Maybe we have become a little too comfortable to take the news of Christmas seriously. Isaiah says, “Comfort, O Comfort my people.” The people of faith of Isaiah’s time were in desperate need of comfort. They were aware of and waiting for the wholeness that was missing from their lives. Maybe we have forgotten our need. Maybe, as one theologian puts it, the real danger is not an overly commercialized Christmas but an over sentimentalized one.⁴ Have you ever thought of it that way? How our holiday traditions really, truly mock the sincerity and severity of what God has done at Christmas? And I am not just talking about the secular traditions, but our religious ones too and perhaps most especially? Maybe the author of 2 Peter is really onto something here, maybe we too should be regarding the patience of the Lord as salvation. Maybe we still have yet to learn that our waiting is more than just holding on. God still calls us to an active patience, to prepare the way for God’s coming both into our world and into our own lives. Perhaps the old saying still has some useful wisdom left for us: Patience is a virtue. Waiting is good for us. It builds character.

Let us pray: *Lord our God, once long, long ago, at just the right time, you sent Jesus, King of kings, Lord of lords, Prince of peace, to live among us. The season of Advent now begun, though, is a season of eager anticipation that invites us to recall that time and in so doing remember its promise and call on our lives. Our Advent prayer is that you will move your people to the edge of that promise in the places of home and work and worship that we might wait with purpose and find meaning in the time of waiting. Amen.*

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Coming of Jesus in Our Midst,” from *A Testament to Freedom, The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 185.

⁴ William Sloan Coffin, *Letters to a Young Doubter* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 47.