

Sermon Notes for 12/11/16 (Advent 3)
Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN
Text: James 5:7-11
Theme: SUFFERING CALLS FOR PATIENT ENDURANCE

The Point: God enables His children to live by faith and patient endurance as we undergo the sufferings that are an intimate part of our earthly journey.

Introduction: How many of you grew up on farms or in farming communities? Even here in the Midway neighborhood of St. Paul, we have those memories to serve us. Connie grew up on a farm, and we have lived in rural communities on occasion. I have also been fortunate enough to have had farmers as part of several of the congregations that I have served. I say this has been a fortunate thing because they have helped me to understand this text from James.

“Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient.” Four times in the five verses of our text, the word “patient” or “patience” occurs, along with a couple of appearances of “endurance.” The call to patience resounds in our ears. We cannot miss it.

Farmers are always ready and willing to discuss the weather, partly because it has such an immediate impact on their livelihood. And, of course, their work impacts all of us directly. The precious crop needs the early and the late rains. The early rains assist the seed in germinating and getting a solid foundation in the earth. The late rains prove invaluable in the fruit being produced in a healthy and abundant fashion, whether that is corn or beans or wheat or whatever else may be growing.

I remember one spring when we had had what most people considered an overabundance of rain. Localized flooding was common. When I asked him about it, my farmer friend just said, “We can never get too much rain.” Rain is the lifeblood of the farmers. He would not complain about the amount, knowing just how dependent he was on its coming regularly. This year, we are close to setting a record in our area for the most precipitation in a year in recorded history. For most of us, that means primarily that we ran our sprinklers less this year than usual. The farmers rejoice in a way that few of us understand.

Some have tried to manufacture rain. In 1839, James Espy claimed that rain could easily be produced by heating the air. But his plan to saturate parched farmland by building great log fires across vast stretches of the American West never materialized -- for which Espy’s contemporaries were probably grateful! Later in the 19th century a new theory emerged: loud noises would bring rain. This theory was put to the test in Texas, where Robert Dyrenforth piled up enough munitions for a small war. He blasted away at the skies, but as one observer wrote, “[Dyrenforth] attacked from the front and rear, by the right and left flank. But the sky remained clear as the complexion of a Saxon maid.” (*Today in the Word*, July 23, 1992)

Farmers cannot create rain. They can only wait on it as the Lord gives it. Maybe that is one of the reasons that rural folks seem to be more religiously alert than urban dwellers. For us city folk, rain is most often a hindrance to – or at best a distraction from – our usual lifeways. It dampens our sidewalks and our spirits. But the farmer waits on the rain and depends on its coming for the crop that he desires to harvest.

As the farmer waits for the rains to nourish the earth and the crops growing in it, so the people of God wait for the coming of the Lord. James (the brother of Jesus and author of today’s text) writes, “Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.” The heart of the farmer is bent toward knowing that the rains will come – maybe not in the most desirable amount or at the most convenient time, but it will come. So he waits with patience and a positive spirit, with a strong and steady heart.

James says that the farmer stands as an example for us as we wait for the coming of the Lord. One thing that we can be sure of is that, as we wait, suffering will be abundant. There is no final solution that men can produce. The only lasting answer to suffering is the coming of our Lord. In 65 years of life and nearly 40 years of ministry, I still have found no complete answer for the question of why suffering exists. Just as there is no solution for thirsty crops and thirsty ground other than rain, so our Lord's coming is the one hope that we have that sin and its results will be undone. That coming has happened in the arrival of Jesus the Messiah, and it will have its ultimate fulfillment when He returns in the clouds with power and glory.

The Old Testament people of God were a waiting people, an expectant people. They lived with their eyes steadfastly fixed on the promises of God. Well, at least the remnant of the people did. The prophets still needed to bring regular reminders that God had not forsaken His own. When the land was being overrun by enemies, Isaiah spoke these words to the people of his day: "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.'"

Whatever the enemies of Israel would pour out on them, however horrible their terrors, however hateful their treatment of the Israelites, the promises of God stood firm. He would come and save them. Suffering was not to be allowed to dominate their hearts and minds or to cloud the promises of the Lord. James uses the prophets of old as illustrations of patience. Most of them were mistreated and persecuted, but still they courageously spoke God's truth to Israel. He also mentions Job's endurance – his story is legendary, known even by many who have never stepped foot into a church or a synagogue. But James tops it off by adding, "You have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful." Indeed, the patience and compassion of the Lord goes beyond that of any of our human mentors. That is the best news that we could ever have, for our patience is hardly worth speaking about. But His is!

According to a traditional Hebrew story, Abraham was sitting outside his tent one evening when he saw an old man, weary from age and travel, coming toward him. Abraham rushed out, greeted him, and invited him into his tent. There he washed the old man's feet and gave him food and drink. The old man immediately began eating, without saying any prayer or blessing. Abraham asked him, "Don't you worship God?" The old traveler replied, "I worship fire only and reverence no other god." When he heard this, Abraham grabbed the old man by the shoulders and threw him out of his tent into the cold night air. When the old man was gone, God called to Abraham, "Friend, where is the stranger?" Abraham replied, "I forced him out because he did not worship you." God answered, "I have suffered him these eighty years, although he dishonors me. Could you not endure him one night?"

We are called on to love our enemies and to live in peace with those around us. That takes a good deal of patience, doesn't it? We would prefer to just do our mercy duty quickly and be done with it. We don't want to take the time and expend the effort to love our neighbor – and especially to love our enemies. That seems to require too much of us, possibly even inviting suffering to our doorstep. It means getting our hands dirty with the dirt of other people's lives. But our constant call is to serve with patience and hope.

One thing that makes for patient endurance is the awareness that something new and better is coming. Martin Luther threw some light on the power of this promise of the coming kingdom: "If I believe the Word, I shall on the Last Day, after the sentence has been pronounced, not only gladly have suffered ordinary temptations, insults, and imprisonment, but I shall also say: 'O, that I did not throw myself under the feet of all the godless for the sake of the great glory which I now see revealed and which has come to me through the merit of Christ!'" What a marvelous attitude!

Listen to what Isaiah says about the coming kingdom of the Lord: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be

opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert. . . A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way . . . No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it . . . And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” Now there is something worth waiting for! This kingdom of our Messiah Jesus will endure forever. No sorrow or sighing, no heartache or tears, no pain or trouble will mar our enjoyment of our Lord and His joy.

The appearance of John the Baptizer announced the coming of this kingdom: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” When John was in prison and under threat of death, he sent his disciples to ask Jesus whether He was the very Messiah. Jesus replied, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” That last statement was rather pointed, considering that John seemed to be wondering whether Jesus was indeed the one John had come to announce. After all, there was not much of the baptism of fire or the clearing of the threshing floor or the burning of the chaff (which John had spoken about in last week’s Gospel lesson).

But Jesus had come displaying all the signs of a Messiah, signs that Isaiah had spoken about – healing the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, even raising the dead from the grave. But the punch line was this: “The poor have good news brought to them.” There is usually plenty of bad news for the poor – bad economy, rising inflation, plagues, famine, fires, illnesses, inadequate medical treatment, layoffs, abuse, oppression, and all the rest. But the Messiah brings good news for the poor, news that God is for them and with them, that their sins are forgiven, that their suffering is not in vain, that they have a home in the heavens that is eternal, that God’s people will stand with them in solidarity, and that each one of them has a vital role to play in God’s economy.

Interestingly, it is often through our times of suffering, when borne patiently, that we make the most progress in terms of spiritual growth and maturity. This can be an important weapon as we deal with troubles and trials in our daily lives. Malcolm Muggeridge, Christian author and thinker, said this: “Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my 75 years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my experience, has been through affliction and not through happiness.” If we are honest, I believe that most of us will have similar reflections. It is often through times of trouble that we have found God’s strength most powerful.

Conclusion: God enables His children to live by faith and patient endurance as we undergo the sufferings that are an intimate part of our earthly journey. To those Christians who are always impatient, here’s a reminder from the 19th-century preacher A.B. Simpson: “Beloved, have you ever thought that someday you will not have anything to try you, or anyone to vex you again? There will be no opportunity in heaven to learn or to show the spirit of patience, forbearance, and longsuffering. If you are to practice these things, it must be now.” A great reminder, isn’t that? Yes, each day we are alive affords countless opportunities to learn patience. Let’s not waste them. Now is the time for learning to endure patiently. Suffering calls for patient endurance, and that is the response of faith to life’s troubles. May that life of patient endurance, even in the face of our personal sufferings, mark each of our lives as we walk toward our final eternal home, in Jesus’ name. AMEN!