

- 1) **BE PATIENT!!** Have you ever given or gotten that command? (I thought so.)
Was it effective—when you gave it, or when you got it? (I thought not.)
The imperative, **BE PATIENT**—it has a built in Catch-22, does it not?
If you **ARE** patient, being “told to” is inappropriate.
If you **AREN’T** patient, being “told to” doesn’t help much, does it?
Indeed, being bidden to “be patient,” can render us **MORE** impatient;
even if we recognize that the order is well intended and very much **IN** order—
even if the one who issues the order is the one who is staring back at us from the mirror.
When my children were small, on car trips they got **VERY** impatient with red lights.
Over and over, louder and louder, they would holler **GREEN—GREEN!**
Telling them to be patient didn’t work; so, to reduce the cacophony in a small car space,
we would urge our children: *Blow the light green.*
They would huff and puff for as long as it took for the light to change its color;
and then they would cheer about what they thought their huffing and puffing had produced.
Blowing the light green—or thinking they were—that was far more satisfying
than patiently waiting for the same stretch of time.
I’m not sure, as an adult, that I have advanced much beyond where they were back then.
Finding myself “red lighted” at many of life’s interchanges—literal and metaphorical;
I catch myself internally huffing and puffing, though I know well it will make no difference.
BE PATIENT! I tell myself; but *We’re wasting time—running out of time*, my self tells me back.
So I send up a plea for Divine Assistance: *God, MAKE me patient—NOW!*
Ever been there, done that, one way or another? (I thought so.)
Utterly unexpected, or totally predicable, red light intersections can seem interminable.
The author of The Letter from James from whom we heard this morning—
he sounds better at issuing the patience order than at following it.
Among his New Testament author colleagues, his voice is among the most strident—
he preaches patience very impatiently.
He has a valid concern, surely; but it’s not all that easy to produce patience on demand, is it?
Even when it is sorely needed.
- 2) Now, it’s only fair to note that some expressions of impatience
seem much more reasonable than others.
It’s one thing to sputter and vent when traffic isn’t moving.
It’s another to be overwhelmed with way too many urgent demands upon your time.
It’s something else again to be stuck on the sidelines of the action,
to watch the clock of your life counting rapidly down, running out of time,
and all the while, the cause in service to which you have given your life
seems stuck in the mud, going nowhere.

- 3) Let's put a name, and a face on this last kind of impatience—John the Baptist.
John has been a passionate, persistent advocate for moral, social, and spiritual reform.
He hasn't just talked the talk; he's walked the walk.
He hasn't advanced his own interests, he has served as a faithful advance agent
for the One whose way he has been preparing.
As a "reward" for calling out the sleezy corruption of a petty tyrant king,
John is now rotting in a jail cell, facing execution.
He is where he is because of his deliberate choice—
to clear the ground for the oncoming Commonwealth Kingdom of God.
And the One whose way he has been preparing seems to be dithering and dawdling at best—
a teaching session here, a healing clinic there,
but no Evil Annihilation Action Plan anywhere in sight.
Time's a-wasting—time is running out, you can almost hear John say,
as he paces back and forth in his small, cramped cell on King Herod's Death Row.
And to his credit—let's say it again—TO HIS CREDIT,
John the Baptist is STILL open to having his take on events corrected.
Though in no position to do anything about it, he is still amenable
to shifting allegiance to another savior if his perception of Jesus has been misplaced.
He sends his disciples to Jesus with a respectful question:
ARE you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?
Are you truly the one that I said you were?
I have to say, this is the most patient expression of impatience I can possibly imagine.
John isn't huffing and puffing to blow the light green.
He's just trying to understand what's going on, so he can get on board as best he can.
- 4) Highly appropriate, then, that Jesus does not put John down for his question;
indeed, He honors John as the greatest of prophets.
And yet, he doesn't really say or do anything new to address John's concerns.
He simply offers additional evidence for what John has heard about already:
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 preached to them.
What John has done—advocating and undertaking radical moral, social, spiritual surgery—
all that is critical, necessary—but, by itself, it is insufficient.
Surgery alone won't heal individuals, or the social order, or a community of faith.
The binding of wounds, the healing of bodies, minds, spirits, factions and divisions—
for all of that, surgery can only be a preparation.
So, look again, John! Jesus gently sends back word to his imprisoned predecessor.
What each of us has been about is a complement to the work of the other.
And sometimes, in individuals and in societies,
the work of healing must commence well before the work of surgery is complete.
Jesus isn't saying: *Just be patient, John!*

Jesus is inviting John into a deeper dimension of patience
by assuring him that his own work has not been for naught,
has not been INVALIDATED, but, in fact, is being VALIDATED by what Jesus is now doing.
And Jesus is indicating that the work of cleansing and curing are connected and continuous.

- 5) In my children's impatience, my impatience, maybe John's and yours as well—
what pushes us over the edge is often more than the feeling of lack of control
(although it does involve that).

There is also a nagging, pressing feeling that we're behind—we're late—
we don't have enough time—and we're rapidly running out of what we have.

But Jesus seems to be suggesting, in response to John's understandable angst over waiting,
that there is more to the meaning of time than that which is limited, that which "runs out,"
and which thus becomes a commodity held hostage in a zero sum game.

While Jesus does not elaborate in Matthew's Gospel;

that different understanding of time is strikingly evident,

both in the prophetic poetry of Isaiah, and in the song of Mary we've heard today.

No less than 24 times in the 10 short verses of his poem, Isaiah promises what SHALL be
in God's grace-filled future for all who are both cleansed and cured.

Yet, in the middle of the poem, comes this sharp command, and this surprising claim:

Be strong! Don't fear! Here IS your God.

God's cleansing, healing future is, for Isaiah, a presence HERE and NOW.

Mary also proclaims and rejoices in God's greatness here and now.

She then proceeds, all appearances to the contrary, to speak of God's liberating acts
as though they were already done deals—facts accomplished,

saving deeds that God HAS done—and, in 10 short verses, Mary sings that 10 times over.

In their odd employment of verb tenses

have Isaiah and Mary been ill served by bad grammar teachers?

Are they, perhaps, seriously time disoriented?

Or is there another possibility—that, having encountered the presence of the Living God,
they have experienced an awareness of Time that is not just linear but multidimensional—

Time that does not simply restrict or extend the clock times of their lives,

but Time that intersects, invades, transposes and transforms their life-times;

and does so in a way that renders the tense categories of grammar utterly inept.

What if an awareness of God's dynamic ETERNAL NOW frees Isaiah, Mary, and can free us
to live in patience, when time seems to be "running out."

What if, in response to John's impatience, Jesus is trying to help him see, help us see
that the time we have put in hasn't been wasted, since it is grounded in God's own?

- 6) What if Advent is not a countdown to December 25th, coupled with: BE PATIENT!

But, instead, an invitation to envision and experience time in a different way—

a time in which patience is not an anxious "waiting it out,"

but rather an attentive, trusting, hope-charged "watchful waiting for"—

watchful waiting for how our time can be more open and available to God's?

What if coming to see our time as rooted and grounded in God's time

could make being patient not an impossible demand, but a liberating gift?