

12 December 2004
Advent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Got Patience?”

Text: James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11; Isaiah 35:1-10

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The word *patience* was prominent in the reading from the Epistle of James we heard today. Four times in four verses. He means it. If an advertising firm had James' account these days, perhaps we would see one of those billboards with the giant letters on them that say, “**Got patience?**”

But patience is not something we're good at, in our day and age. Perhaps it has always been so, I don't know. But it seems that especially these days, these internet and satellite days, these I need it and want it yesterday days, that this is a problem. And then add to that the Christmas season, and our impatience for the holiday to arrive – snooping for presents, the shopping season starting earlier and earlier – and you have a Word of God here that is quite out of step with the times. Patience – yeah, easy for you to say!

But what about patience? Why do some have this quality and some do not? Is it just a matter of some being able to wait better than others? Or is there something else involved? Could it be that all this talk of patience is, in reality, really a matter of control? Especially when it comes to God. If we are impatient with God, is it because we want to be in control? Because we want to direct the goings on? If so, then a call for patience isn't telling us to just get better at waiting, but is a call to relinquish control. A call to repent. A call to leave things in God's hands.

In the Holy Gospel today, we again heard from John the Baptist, but a very different word from what we heard last week. Last week we heard John's strong message of repentance and judgment, of wilderness and sin, and yet also baptism and forgiveness. John was proclaiming and getting results. . . . Today, we hear, he is in prison. King Herod has gotten tired of his constant preaching against him, and so has incarcerated him. And not “Camp Cupcake,” like where Martha Stewart is. Real prison. The kind of place many people did not come back from. . . . Today, John speaks again. Sending a question to Jesus. And in John's words, do we hear a bit of *impatience*? “***Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?***” If Jesus is the One, why is He letting John, His

forerunner, rot in prison? Are you going to do something, or not? Are you going to get me out, or not? Or shall we look for another?

And what is Jesus' answer? Well, really, He says, *Patience John!* The blind are seeing, the lame are walking, the lepers are being cleansed, the deaf are hearing, the dead are being raised, and the Good News is being preached. It is all happening John, just as the prophet Isaiah said it would when the Messiah came. But God decides. He decides the who, the what, the when, the how, and the why. He gives to whom He wishes to give, and at the proper time. Him, not you. ***“And blessed is the one who is not offended by [this.]”*** Blessed is the one who lets God be God. Who believes, though things may look bad. Who is patient, for God is in control.

And after giving this answer, Jesus then goes on to praise John and speak highly of him, even after such a question. For what is happening to John is not because he did anything wrong. He is not being punished while others are being freed and healed and saved. In fact, Jesus says, the reality is just the opposite! For ***“among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.”*** Such high praise! . . . But with these words Jesus is teaching that you cannot judge God's favor by outward appearance. For to do so, to judge, is trying to take control back from God. Control that is not ours to take. We are instead called to be patient – no matter where you live, or when you live, and even if you are John the Baptist. God will come. He will save. And *then* greatness. For ***“even the least in the kingdom of Heaven is greater”*** than the greatest on this earth. And to this heavenly reward, this greatness, Jesus is working. Working not for Himself, for it is already His. He is the Son of God. He is working it for us. We are simply called to be patient. To trust. For the Lord is coming.

James then gives us an example of this patience, for our consideration, when he says: ***“As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.”*** But this patience is not general kind of waiting that he is speaking of here, for what did these prophets speak of? Many things, but *primarily*, of the coming Saviour. Of the birth of Christ. And although they spoke often of it, and suffered greatly for faithfully speaking of it, they did not get to see it. In fact, only one of the Old Testament prophets got to see this prophecy come to pass, and that was the very last one, John the Baptist himself. But even though that first Christmas took a long time coming, God was faithful. And it *did* come to pass, in God's time, in His way.

And their situation is very much like ours today, which makes them such a good example. They were waiting for the coming of the Lord in His first Advent – His birth, and we are waiting for the coming of the Lord in His second Advent – His coming again in glory. And both call for patience. Patience as in relinquishing control. Patience as in trust.

Patience as in leaving our lives and our times in God's hands.

And so we are presented with an alternative, aren't we? Two ways we could go. The way of patience, which is the way of discipleship, the way of following; **or** the way of unbelief, which is the way of control, the way of choosing my own path, of trying to lead God where I want Him to go, and where I want Him to be. And that second path is a mighty attractive path! It appeals to the sinner in all of us, to bend and shape God to my wishes and desires and thoughts. But that is idolatry. . . . And so the prayer of all believers, of all Christians: ***"Lord, I believe; help my unbelief."*** (Mk 9:24)

That's it, isn't it? For you and I. For John. For all Christians. We believe, and yet . . . How often is John's question our question? His question on our lips? Are you? Will you? When? Can't you see I'm suffering, struggling, rotting in this prison? ***"Lord, I believe; help my unbelief."***

And this, He does. For the Lord is patient with us. For as we repent of our unbelief – of our wanting to take the road of control, not patience – as we repent, we are walking Isaiah's ***"Way of Holiness."*** Others may take the comfortable way, the easy way; but this is the way of the Lord. The way of repentance, confession, and cross. The way of faith, forgiveness, and resurrection. This is the way John came to prepare, the way our Lord walked, and the way He now bids us follow. And on this path He promises not ease, or luxury, or greatness – only His presence. His presence to water us, to feed us, to sustain us, to forgive us. His presence to be with us where we are, that we might be with Him where He is.

And this is the very thing the prophets spoke of: **His presence with us**, where we are, in the flesh. Immanuel, God with us. For He came, as He promised. Born of a virgin, in Bethlehem. To be with us in all of life – in birth, in trouble, in temptation, in joy and sorrow, in prison, and even in death. For this is the path that He took, and so He knows what you are going through, and He knows what you need. He knows, even better than you know. And He provides. Providing His Word to sustain John in prison, and providing His Word to sustain us. His Word preached, His Word joined to the water of Holy Baptism, and His Word joined to the bread and wine of Holy Communion. And His Word make these ordinary things extraordinary. He makes them His gifts, giving not just advice or instruction, but faith. Not just washing, but forgiveness. Not just food, but His very Body and Blood. And in His coming in these ways, He is working *for* us. He is working *in* us. And we are saved.

So will you ever have doubts? Fears? Questions? You most certainly will. For like John, we live in a prison house of sin and death from which we cannot set ourselves free.

And questions will come; and a lack of patience. But the great paradox of Christianity is that although, like John, we live in this world of sin and death, we have been set free from sin and death. In Christ. In His forgiveness and gift of new life. . . . And so we are living in two kingdoms, very different from each other. In the world in body; in Heaven by faith. But this too, Jesus knows. It is what He did for us. It is what we see at Christmas. The Heavenly come down to earth. . . . In His first advent, His first coming, He conquered sin and death through His death and resurrection. And in His second advent, His second coming, He will do so again – conquering death by raising us from death to life eternal. And then all doubts and fears and questions will be gone; all questions of patience and control done. There will be only life with our Saviour and our King.

“Are you the one who is to come?” John asked. Yes, John, He is. And still for us, He is. He is coming again. Of this you can be sure. Until He does, be patient. Let God be God. No matter what you are going through right now, no matter where you are. You are blessed. He is coming. Amen, come, Lord Jesus!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.