



REAL FAITH / REAL LIFE SERIES

FAITH THAT *Lasts*

JULY 4, 2021 | JAMES 5:7-16

FAITH THAT LASTS

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Have you ever been stopped with a whole line of cars at a red light? Admittedly, there's been so little traffic this past year, you may need to cast your mind back awhile. Everyone is lined up waiting, brake lights lit up, and then the traffic light turns green, feet come off the brake pedal, the very first car in line starts to move...and someone way at the back of the line of cars honks their horn. As though the light turning green could magically vanish the half-dozen cars between them and the intersection! But people get impatient sometimes, we all get impatient sometimes; especially when home or work or something exciting lies up ahead, and having to wait makes us frustrated. And so the horn gets honked when the light turns green.

The more one reads of the Bible and considers the history of the Church, the more it becomes obvious that the great Christian pastime is waiting.

God's people waited in Egypt, enslaved, for decades, then wandered the desert for a generation. They waited in exile for nearly a century, and for the Messiah to come for centuries more. We have waited some two thousand years so far, for Christ to come again. Christians are Olympic-calibre wait-ers; we are trained in patience. Luckily, patience is generally held to be a virtue! And it was part of the fruit of the Spirit, too, if you recall from last Sunday. But here at the end of his letter, James upholds patience as a central to a faith that lasts. This is our final Sunday with James; and this week, he writes about how to settle into our faith-shaped lives and live them well, for our whole lives. And he begins with patience.

There are times when it is important not to be patient; in a life-or-death emergency situation, for example; being calm is important, but being patient might not lend enough urgency to our search for help. Patience is also not the right attitude to take in a situation of domestic abuse or when suffering from an injustice, whether personal or shared by a community.

But patience is a virtue in many other parts of our lives. Certain kinds of work require immense patience. A woodworker restoring a piece of antique furniture, a builder constructing a new house, a knitter carefully counting out a pattern.

All of this work must be done carefully and patiently, because precision and accuracy are essential to the work being done well. Learning a new skill or art often requires patience: years of lessons and practice precede playing Chopin or Mozart; time on the driving range is needed to master a good golf swing; memorization and awkward conversation are required to become fluent in a new language. All of us understand these kinds of patience: the diligent careful kind, and the practice makes perfect kind.

Patience can also be a virtue in situations where waiting is required, and we are powerless to change the circumstances: sitting in the car on a highway during a rush hour traffic jam or way back in line at a stoplight, the endless and numerous lineups to move through an airport, waiting in the checkout line at the grocery store during COVID, when safety requires serving one customer per till at a time. In these situations, the waiting is unavoidable, once we're in the midst of it. Try as we may, we can't do much to change or take charge over some things. We can get frustrated or angry, and feel our blood pressure rise... or we can be patient and wait. This kind of necessary patience is familiar to us all, too.

James is thinking more of this second type of necessary patience. The farmer, James writes, waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. Centuries before modern irrigation turned the semi-arid farmland of Israel and Palestine into well-watered, productive fields, farmers there waited on the rain. It's the same in many places still today, too. Whether or not there is a crop, a harvest at the end of the season, depends almost entirely on how much moisture falls, in what form and at what time. There must be rain when the seed is sown to germinate it and then rain again later to nourish the crop once it is established and growing. Too much cold spring rain before planting can water-log the soil and cause delays in sowing; heavy rain – or worse, hail – just before harvest can be equally disastrous.

There is nothing the farmer can do about any of this; and so we learn, one way or the other, the patience to wait.

You also must be patient, James writes. And then he goes on to write of suffering and endurance.

Because James' letter is addressed to churches – communities of faith – we can assume that he's not thinking about individual suffering in the sense of facing illness, disability or death, or at least, not only thinking of that. He raises several issues within this letter that hint at situations the churches are enduring together, like poverty and an inclination to flattering the wealthy among its members, persecution by a powerful elite, hypocrisy and in-fighting, being hemmed in and isolated within a larger, non-Christian town or city. James' advice to allow our faith in Jesus to shape our lives addresses the problems within the church, and patience – or rather, patient endurance – is his advice for dealing with the situation of trouble from outside the church, because that part of it is beyond their control. When James pulls patience and endurance together, he does it by reminding us of the long-ago Old Testament prophets and of Job, the most infamous sufferer in the Bible. We might be expecting James to refer to Jesus' suffering on the Cross here, but he doesn't. And I think that's because there's an important difference between the suffering of Job and the prophets, and that of Jesus.

Jesus, though he would have happily had his particular cup of suffering taken from him, went patiently and quietly to his death, knowing, because he was and is God, what the purpose and outcome would be, and the great need for forgiveness and new life for us that he was fulfilling. Job and the prophets, though, they suffered and waited and were indeed patient. They endured long waits, and terrible trouble, but they were not very quiet about their situations.

Think of the deep yearning of the prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah for the renewal of God's people and the end of exile. Or of Job, who lost so much and was brought so low, yet still had the boldness and faith to demand that God see and speak to his suffering. Or of the longing of the psalmists who lament and cry, "How long, O Lord!" Or of Amos, whom we read together a month ago now, and his excoriating words condemning God's people for their false, hypocritical worship and empty faith that bore no resemblance to the shape of their lives. Whether the day of the Lord's coming would be a day of judgement or redemption, the prophets of Israel and even Job waited with a noisy, lamenting patience in the midst of suffering, knowing that, whatever it brought, that day would be the Lord's.

Every Sunday, we pray for this very thing; we pray for what we're all waiting for: your kingdom come, on earth as in heaven. It was the core proclamation of Jesus' ministry, whether in words or in his actions.

It happened first in Jesus' person, where divine and human came together perfectly without either becoming less as a result of it. And it'll happen again, on the day of Christ's return, a new heaven and new earth come together as perfectly one as Jesus himself is, the full and final coming of the kingdom of God on the Day of the Lord. It is this for which we are waiting patiently, but, if we follow James' advice, we wait with a patience that is noisy and lamenting and as demanding of compassion, justice and rightness with God as that of the prophets.

It is not as though we were waiting in a long line of traffic at a red light that won't be turning green anytime soon; because of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the light is already turned green long ago. And what's a little silly and annoying on the road is exactly what we are meant to do as Christians: we are meant to honk from the back of the line of traffic to get the rest of humanity looking up at that light, anticipating the open road beyond it.

Be patient, writes James, and strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. James is full of anticipation, full of hope, as we ought to be, too, that God will keep God's promises to renew and restore creation, to save his people, to set right all that is wrong. The church is meant to keep alive that hope, to keep proclaiming that God is not finished with either creation of human history, that God is present and active in our lives and in the life of the world.

Sounds good, right?

These are familiar, uplifting words, something to have faith in. But we know what James would say about a faith that is only words: it's not enough.

We've reflected these past weeks on James' useful and sensible ways of seeing how our faith in Jesus transforms us, until the shape of our faith and the shape of our life are one and the same. And now, still in his same practical and reasonable fashion, James tells us the shape of a church that proclaims our kingdom-hope together.

A church living together a life shaped by faith in Jesus would be committed to sharing each other's burdens and joys. In previous chapters, James envisions a community of faith where class and poverty do not divide us; here, he applies the same logic to grief and illness and sin. If one member is sick or overwhelmed by trouble and suffering, the whole congregation is weaker.

Anyone who is afflicted should feel confident to ask for help from their neighbours, and the congregation's leaders will pray on their behalf and treat them with oil in the name of the Lord. James revisits the topic of what we say to one another as vital to our community life. In chapter three, he focused on the destructive consequences of harsh, unconsidered words, but here he emphasises how utterly necessary honesty and telling the truth is among us. Let your "Yes" be yes and your "No" be no: tell the truth every time, all the time, and no oath needs to be taken, since everything that's said among us is true. And that is because honesty is the basis of trust, which allows us to do as James says and confess our sins, our most painful failings, to one another, and share together in forgiveness, healing, and the growth that comes after.

This is what a church whose life together is shaped by faith is like; a church that has been transformed by the indwelling presence of the Spirit, a church that lives Christ's peace with one another, that works cooperatively, that builds one another up; that is a place to settle in and live our faith-shaped lives together.

This is what a church existing as a distinct and visibly different kind of community that proclaims hope is like; this is what waiting patiently together should be like, and it's also what a church is like when it's proclaiming to one another and the world that the kingdom of God is already here in small ways and coming in a big way, and no matter how long we have to wait for it, that is always going to be the best and most perfect gift God gives us. Thanks be to God! Amen.