

## **“Patiently Waiting for a Message from God”**

A Sermon Shared with St. Andrew's United Church  
on the Fourth Sunday of Lent

Sunday, March 11, 2018 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Psalm 107, Part 1 (VU #831)

Ephesians 2:1-10

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

How often is your patience tested in one day? It may be lining up at a grocery store line, or awaiting a long line of people to see a bank teller; it may be in a medical waiting room or it may be standing in line at a customer service counter; it may be stuck trying to turn left at the Four Corners or trying to get down the Kingsway.

We all have experienced lines and waits. They test our temper and our ability to be patient.

Now there are days, few and far between I must admit, that I realize **my** patience is not tested but the patience of those around me is. I may not be in a hurry and let two or three people enter traffic ahead of me; I may be happy to drive the speed limit and others are impatiently frustrated that I am not going faster; while I usually let someone go ahead of me who has only one or two items in a grocery line where I may have 8 or 12, someone else thinks their turn has been compromised.

What is patience as Richard Wagamese adds it to his line of insight, and how is patience a Christian virtue?

As I said a couple of weeks ago in relationship with the concept of being “kind,” so too with “patience” – it is rarely used in the Bible. We may utter to one another “Patience is a virtue,” but there is little biblical evidence that it is as prominent as we have made it to be in our culture.

Why is that so? I think in part it reveals that people in the Bible are often facing hardship and uncertainty, and they need to act quickly and decisively.

It is hard to think of patience as a positive quality if you are facing war-torn hardship, or issues of personal safety. Decisive action is needed – and now.

But patience does not come into the story until we are talking about the development of faith in later generations of the church, or when people are seeking to make right relationships that have gone astray. Being patient involves giving time to the other (and to one's self) to mend a broken situation, or await a final resolution that is to the advantage of both.

There's the story of the man owed thousands by a servant, and the owner of the estate says that he will sell the man and his family into slavery in order to get at least part of the debt back, but the servant begs with the owner, and says, “Please be patient with me – I will pay you back,” and so the owner lets him go. But of course that same servant, when he goes to

someone under him who owes him money, and the person says “Please be patient with me,” the sensitivity is lacking, and he demands payment immediately.

Patience also is important in the writings of the book of James, as the early church seeks to understand its role and expectations. James urges people to be patient, even though the return of Jesus, widely anticipated, has not happened, and sets as an example the patience of the farmer awaiting the development of the yearly crop, and recognizing that germination and growth is a long process, and trying to speed up the growth cycle never works, so just be patient and accept God’s time in the unfolding of the truth of history.

The Psalm for today speaks of the hope people have when they cry out to God in the midst of their despair and feel a response to guide them. Implicit in the Psalmist’s words is that they need patience to hear the response from God, and then respond to God’s direction themselves.

The passage from Ephesians speaks of the ways that people in the church were uplifted from lives of emptiness and despair when they were willing to receive the goodness of God and respond. When we think the answers of life are only up to us, and we are not patient enough to hear the guidance that God can and does offer, we get lost on the wrong track.

Now the two words for “patience” in the Greek New Testament are words we may have difficulty adapting to today: The main word used, *anexikakos*, means “to hold up under evil,” while the other most commonly used word translated as “being patient” is *makrothumeo*, which means to “suffer for a long time.”

Our world has changed – we are not in a society where we accept either being under the authority of another (at least if that authority limits or removes our ability to think independently) and we are not a society that sees “long suffering” as an attribute to accept. We expect and demand more – and we should.

In his book *Ethics in a Permissive Society*, William Barclay, the great Scottish pastor, preacher and biblical scholar tells of the ways in which children were raised in John Wesley’s school. Wesley believed that children should not play at all – children who play become adults who will play and who will do the work? The school was structured with no time off and no play time in the day.

But Wesley was amazed that children still would wander through the bush and create their own games. And the harder they tried to stop play, the more it fascinated the children.

We have a different understanding about play today, and it did not take a Maria Montessori to teach us of the role of play in an educational process.

You see, today being patient is not so much awaiting the time when the persecutor gets tired of persecuting, or struggle through moments of submission until we can get to be the one in charge (as the passages from the Bible suggest), but patience I see as more a willingness to see life as ongoing learning, and we never learn and grow if we fail to see the gift in each experience given to us. Patience is allowing the accumulation of experiences and insights to give us strength so that we have the wherewithal to manage our lives when

new situations reveal similar demands and expectations that we have experienced in the past.

How many of us had patience to see hope in the world during the rhetoric between North Korea and the US under Donald Trump over nuclear proliferation this past year? I certainly did not, yet stories of possible dialogue have emerged.

What about those who had the patience to see the possibility to renew Sudbury 50 years ago, and plant one tree at a time until millions of trees were planted, and the landscape if not restored, certainly renewed? Few had that vision, but their vision, and patient nurturing, has transformed this region.

Successful parents and grandparents have the ability to see beyond the crisis of the moment and await the maturation of their offspring without dismissing them in the midst of a time of confusion, uncertainty, or crisis, or sometimes even worse, elevating them at a time of success and accolades in a way that they are not ready to accept and live up to. We need to be patient in our child rearing, our relationships with others, and our future expectations.

Though not often outlined in the scriptures, we see patience as a virtue – in Indigenous teachings, in Christian lifestyle teachings. If only we had the patience to experience insights that are out there waiting to emerge.

When Paul writes to the church in Ephesus, he speaks about the faults people had, and the sinful lives people led, but through accepting Christ into their lives they were transformed to new life. I believe part of that new life is being patient to allow the world to unfold in God's way, and to accept the future in ways that upholds faith and restores confidence in our lives.

A simple message – Be patient, and live.