

Thy Kingdom Come: Active Patience Between the Alpha and Omega  
December 12, 2010 – Third Sunday in Advent  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:

Isaiah 35:1-10

Psalm 146:5-10

Matthews 11:2-11

James 5:7-10

I wish I could say that Thursday was unusual, but I can't.

Our house was up as usual at 6. I fed the cat and the dogs, made coffee, read the paper and prodded the girls to get to the car a little early. After dropping them off at school, I raced back uptown for a breakfast event put on by the Community Building Initiative, (whose co-chair, by the way, is Caldwell's own Deb Hanna). There we broke bread. We enjoyed singing performances, heard speakers and participated in table discussions about the future of our city. On the way out, I greeted friends, squeezed in a couple of business conversations with colleagues, and exchanged business cards with a few folks.

On the way back to the church, I swung by the drug store to drop off a prescription. At work, I made several phone calls, opened my mail, wrote my newsletter column, reviewed the rest of the newsletter copy, met with our office manager Leslie, read 14 emails, wrote 6 and checked Facebook. By then it was noon.

I swung back by the drug store to pick up the prescription and, back on the road on the way to do an errand for the church, I came to a stop behind a mini-van with one of those vanity license plates bearing a secret message. You know the kind. At first they look like just a jumble of letters but then you get sucked into the challenge of trying to decipher the code.

This one hit me between the eyes. The license plate read: IM2BZRU2?

Ouch.

I thought about that for a moment. I'm positive my family would fall out laughing at the thought of me as a rapper. But if I were a rapper, they would say that should be my rapper name - 2BZ. Guilty as charged.

But I know I am not the only one, especially this time of year. Perhaps in different ways, we are all probably 2BZ. We can blame it on the commercialism of it all. But most of us probably spend more time waiting in line or in traffic than in waiting on the Lord. For the last two weeks, we've been thinking about this season of waiting with a specific phrase in mind - the words from those Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come ...." What do we mean by those words, we've been asking ourselves, especially as they relate to the Advent discipline of hopeful expectation? What kind of kingdom? What kind of king?

Once again this morning we heard how all four of our scripture readings from the lectionary answer that very question with marvelous cohesiveness, even though their circumstances range widely and their origins span centuries.

From Isaiah:

"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom ... and the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing."

From Psalm 146:

"The Lord sets the prisoners free: the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up the bowed down .... The Lord watches over the strangers, upholds the orphan and the widow ... the Lord will reign forever."

From the gospel of Matthew:

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."

And from the Letter of James:

"Strengthen your hearts for the coming of the Lord."

What do you hear in those scriptures? What thread of hope and expectation ties them together? There are multiple answers to that question but what I hear is patience.

Isaiah's intentional use of the firm but indefinite verb "shall," the psalmist's vision of hope for prisoners, strangers, orphans and widows, John the Baptist's promise of a messiah and James' anticipation of the coming of the Lord.

They all make the promise of the kingdom to come, but it is a promise that requires patience. We hear that in today's reading from James in particular.

“Be patient, therefore, beloved until the coming of the Lord .... You must be patient.”

The Greek word for patience that the author of the letter of James used has a distinct meaning. We use the word patient most often to refer to what we need to be while sitting in traffic or when we are exasperated with a loved one or when we watch this year's Carolina Panthers. We need patience sometimes when things aren't clicking with our co-workers. We need even deeper patience when we are awaiting medical test results or a response to a job application.

But what the author of the letter of James means is something a little less immediate, less temporal. And that's important for us to know in this short-attention span era of ours in which we reboot our computer if it makes us wait more than a minute. The Greek here translates to patience as “long-suffering.” Both words in that definition are important.

To take the first word, the arc of the Christian life is in fact “long.” We are not born with full understanding of our faith. We don't have it when we are confirmed, as with the youth who lit the advent candle this morning. We don't have it when we are 25 or 45 or 65 or 85. The Christian walk is focused on the far horizon, not next Tuesday.

As for suffering, the meaning of the letter is more focused on endurance than how we might think of suffering. Yes, if they live by and for the gospel, people of faith at times may suffer, especially in a world that rejects the gospel. But endurance is what's needed to finish a marathon – and life, including the life of faith, is a marathon, not a sprint.

As those who pray “thy kingdom come,” it's equally important to know what James means when he writes, as in this morning's reading, that “the coming of the Lord is near.” The author doesn't necessarily mean “soon.” By “near” he means the coming of the Lord is “at hand,” just as the gospel of Mark summarizes Jesus preaching when he wrote, “the kingdom of God is at hand.” (1:15)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Points made by Paul Achtemeier and Joanna Adams in Feasting on the Word commentary, Year A, Volume 4, p. 65

It is at hand because it has come into the world in Christ, who fulfilled and surpassed all the prophecies of a messiah. And it is still at hand because the work of Christ on earth is not completed. Until Christ comes again, the kingdom is at hand and, indeed, rests in our hands as the church, the body of Christ.

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If that's true, if this momentous work is in our hands as the body of Christ, where does patience fit in? Why focus on patience? Why not instill a sense of urgency instead? Why not focus solely on action in the name of the Lord, in response to God's gift of our salvation in Christ?

Are we to sit by patiently? Or are we to act?

The letter of James gives us the wonderful image of the farmer.

“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.” (5:7)

Anyone who knows anything about farming knows that farmers work hard, long days without weekends off. Even then, they can do everything right, but the crop still depends on the rain.

As I've mentioned before, I spent a week or two each summer of my childhood on my grandparents' farm in Mississippi. I learned many lessons there. My granddad and uncle stayed busy all times of year. In planting season, they wouldn't even come in from the fields for lunch. When I was small, I went with those who took lunch out to them in the field. Later, I drove the tractor with them up and down the rows until the sun set. In season, they put in the crop. Then they fed it, protected it from insects and kept the rows clean of weeds and finally harvested it. In between, they fixed the equipment, cared for the cattle, tended an orchard and harvested a vegetable garden, among other things. They were rarely inactive.

But some of my most distinct memories were of the rare rainy days. That's because my grandfather and uncle were around the house on those days. Their demeanor was somehow different. They took rainy days as a gift. They may have done some paper work, spent a little more time reviewing the farm commodity prices in the newspaper or looking up weather predictions in the almanac. But my grandfather would also slip in a

nap on those days. He knew that the rain was needed and took those days to practice patience, which was not always his strong suit ... nor, as his kin, is it mine.

“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.”

When we pray the words “thy kingdom come” and when we practice the discipline of expectation, we are like the farmer who knows that the best crop depends on both an early and a late rain. As people of faith, we live in between the divine early rain, the arrival of the kingdom of God in Christ, and the divine late rain, the completion of the kingdom sometime in the future.

We put our faith in the Christ who said, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.” We live in between the Alpha and the Omega, and that requires patience. Not plain vanilla, passive patience as if we are watching a cake bake in the oven, but an active patience, a patience like that of the farmer who stays busy even after the crop is in but knows that the final yield depends on the rains, whose timing he cannot predict or control. We seek to balance joyful anticipation with long suffering, as James described Christian patience.

This time of year, our usually active church takes a rare break, a slow-down from its normally busy pace. That’s as it should be. We have much more in ministry to do and more than 100 of you have committed your time and talent to a range of ministries in 2011. But now is the time for us to be still, to wait again on the Lord who feeds and sustains us. Most of the time we are active doing our part in ministry, but we are also called to be patient, to recognize that God is in charge. In Advent, we are especially aware of the tension between those states of mind and heart.

St. Ignatius, a Spanish knight, priest and theologian who lived in the 1500s, said it so aptly: “We pray as if everything depended on God and ... and we work as if everything depended on us.”

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Earlier this year, the novelist Anne Rice provoked the world of faith when she announced she would “quit Christianity.” On her Facebook account, she wrote these words:

“I remain committed to Christ as always, but not to being ‘Christian’ or to being a part of Christianity. It’s simply impossible for me to ‘belong’ to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious and deservedly infamous group.

“In the name of Christ,” she continued, “I refuse to be anti-gay ... anti-feminist ... anti-artificial birth. I refuse to be anti-Democrat ... anti-secular humanism ... anti-science ... and anti-life.”

If anything, Anne Rice’s public pronouncement articulates our times. The year 2010 has been another year in which Christianity has not done itself any favors. A recent survey found that, when asked about Christianity’s contributions to society, Americans cited more negatives than benefits. Hatred and violence topped the list, followed by opposition to gay marriage and sex abuse in the Roman Catholic Church.

But I don’t see how walking away from Christianity would be pleasing to Christ. Christ himself was surrounded by apostles who repeatedly didn’t get it, Roman officials who were intimidated by him, Jewish officials who feared him and thousands who did not understand his message while he was on the earth. They were, no doubt, equally quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and infamous. But Christ called them all to be the church.

Just as James’ letter says, it does take long-suffering patience and endurance to be the church, to be a Christian. It’s easy to quit. It’s harder to stay in the body of Christ, with all of its cancers and brokenness. That is the call of the church as long as we are between the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last rain.

We pray the words “thy kingdom come” with sure conviction that there is more. But, for now, we also cultivate the soil and tend to God’s creation and await the full harvest. Friends, in this season of Advent, let us also cultivate our own capacity for active patience in service of the one who came in a manger and was revered that one night by kings and shepherds.

Amen

