

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

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2 Advent, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

Isaiah 35:1-10

Psalm 146:4-9

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

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“Be patient.” Words we learn as children when we’re waiting for Christmas, or for the end of school, or for a loose tooth to come out. Words we hear throughout our lives, sometimes easy to heed, sometimes not easy. Words we heard today from the Letter of James: “Be patient for the coming of the Lord.”

Advent is basically about patience and waiting. There’s waiting for Christmas, counting the weeks with an Advent wreath or the days by opening doors on an Advent calendar. But beyond that there’s the bigger waiting that James talks about, waiting for the day of the Lord, waiting for redemption, for the world to be made right, for wars and hunger and violence to cease and tears to be dried, for the long arc of history to not just bend toward justice but to actually get there. And James counsels patience, like the farmer who waits on the precious crop which grows on its own time and can’t be hurried.

I'm not a farmer, though I know that some in our congregation are. But in my own life I can think of examples of long slow patience, as probably you can in yours. About three years ago I started doing some strength training. I'd done some running over the years but not a lot of lifting weights. I'm not a person genetically gifted to grow big muscles. And three years later I still don't have very big muscles and I'm not as strong as I'd like to be—but I'm stronger than I was three years ago. I know someone who's been doing a course of therapy to get over a difficult phobia. It was supposed to be a three-month course, and a year later, she's still working on it, with two steps forward and one step back, but still the progress since the beginning is dramatic. Lots of things in this life are so slow as to be discouraging, with progress that's so slow as to be imperceptible, and yet in the long run we see the growth.

But even those examples seem a little too linear, too scripted and controlled. Something about our modern, technological, consumeristic culture encourages us to believe that everything can be solved with the right plan, right tools, right protocols. Do this exercise routine, do the right therapy, eat the right nutrition, get enough sleep, and you *will* make progress in the long run, even if it's slow. I don't think that's what James had in mind. That first-century farmer tilled and fertilized and planted and waited on the rains, but then maybe the locusts came. Or the Romans invaded. Or a wildfire happened, or the market crashed. Sometimes our best efforts don't end up the way we hope or expect. Our idea that we have control over much of anything is mostly an illusion, wishful thinking to cope with an uncertain world.

So what does it mean to have hope even when things don't seem to be getting better and maybe are getting worse? When things might not get better at all, or maybe not in your lifetime, and you're working for a future you may never see? That's the Advent hope James is talking about, I think. That's the Advent hope we need.

I read recently about Nelson Mandela and his imprisonment at Robben Island in South Africa. He was 45 years old in 1964 when he was sentenced to life. In prison, he and his colleagues did hard labor breaking rocks in a limestone quarry. For the first several years he was allowed one letter and one visit from family every six months. No newspapers, no radio, no word from the outside world. His two young daughters grew up without him. He was in prison as the Vietnam War raged then ended, as people landed on the moon, as boycotts and protests and sometimes violence continued in South Africa, as the Cold War waxed and waned, as the Berlin Wall fell. He'd been in prison for 27 years when in 1990 he was released as the apartheid government crumbled and he went on to be elected president in South Africa's first democratic election.

What did it take for Nelson Mandela to wake up every morning in year 1 or year 3 or year 8 in prison? What kind of hope helped sustain him to advocate for better treatment for him and his colleagues, to little by little win the privileges of having books and correspondence courses, to secretly work on writing his autobiography and stashing the pages away not knowing if it would ever be published?

Mandela's story is inspiring partly of course because it has a happy ending, or at least as much of one as we almost ever get in this complicated world. He never got those 27 years back, but apartheid ended and he was vindicated and by the time he died in 2013 he was universally acclaimed as one of humanity's great moral leaders. But what if apartheid had never ended and he'd died in prison? Would that negate the hope and persistence and courage of those long years in prison? Surely not. How many courageous and faithful people throughout history have lived and died without ever seeing their hopes realized?

Maybe that's the difference between patience and hope. Patience is waiting a long time for what you know is eventually coming. Hope is hanging in there even when you have no idea if it's ever coming or not. In this Advent, in this world, we need both.

John the Baptist was in prison too, sent there by King Herod when John's message about God's reign got a little too political. He knew his successor was coming and he had high expectations. We heard about them last week: "His threshing fork is in his hand and he will separate the wheat from the chaff and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire." And then he heard about what Jesus was doing—and he seems to have been unimpressed. Here John sits in prison waiting for the Messiah to overthrow Caesar or set fire to God's enemies and instead the one he's put his hopes on is going around a little corner of Galilee doing some very nice healings and proclaiming some very nice good news to the poor and not raining down unquenchable fire on much of anyone. So no wonder he sends his followers to ask "Are you really the one, or are we going to have to wait around for someone else?"

The truth is that this upside-down Messiah is transforming the world in ways John would have wept to even imagine, so much so that even as John sits awaiting his own beheading there is a hope for him beyond his own death, thanks to the power of the Messiah he thought seemed a little too weak.

That Messiah is still transforming the world to this day. Little by little in ways seen and unseen, the power of self-giving love is spreading in ways that are occasionally visible like the end of apartheid, but are most often hidden and imperceptible like yeast spreading through a lump of flour, like a shoot sprouting from an underground seed, like a cup of cold water given in compassion or a relationship restored by a genuine apology or a hard truth told in frankness and love.

Our hope is in God. And God's love cannot be defeated, in this world or in the next. Our call is to be faithful in the times and places we are put in; not necessarily always successful, but faithful. As the old rabbinic commentary puts it, "The day is short, and the work is plentiful. You are not required to complete the work. But neither may you abandon it."

May God give us patience, animated by hope, and keep us faithful in our own day, until the day when all things are brought together in love.