

**December 15, 2019 (3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent) | Sanctuary worship service**

**TEXT: James 5:7–12**

**TITLE: Active Presence**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

Human beings are many things, but we are not innately a patient species. It's okay to admit this out loud: you and I, each one of us, are not particularly patient people. If you object to this characterization, imagine yourself right now stuck in rush hour stop-n-go traffic on 376 or 279; imagine yourself four full grocery carts away from the Giant Eagle cashier; imagine sitting in hard chairs at the Motor Vehicles office and the number on your slip of paper is 35 numbers larger than what's on the electronic monitors overhead. And in every one of those situations, ask yourself: Would it make things better if someone was next to me, patting my arm and telling me "Now, now, just be patient."

Patience doesn't come naturally to us. It has to be learned. Usually it is learned out of necessity and experience. If you want to do a good job and you're painting a room, repairing a piece of jewelry, adding up a long column of numbers, or sewing stitches around squares of cloth for a quilt, you quiet yourself down and work patiently, carefully concentrating and taking your time. Why? Because rushing only leads to mistakes and you'll just have to do it all over again.

James 5 opens with that quiet voice saying to us, "Be patient, beloved." To get us to slow down, the author goes on to talk about farmers who raise crops without extra irrigation. They are dependent on early rains that fall upon the newly planted seeds so they'll germinate and then late rains that fall upon the young plants to help them grow and produce their harvest. You can pace and worry about the rains, but that won't affect their timing one bit. So a good farmer is patient, watching the horizon for signs of rainclouds in due season.

The full first sentence in James 5 says, "Be patient, beloved, until the coming of the Lord." As we go about our lives now, we are to patiently keep our gaze on the far horizon of God's realm, God's healing and completion of this imperfect life. We do well to remember how brief human history is in comparison to the vast age of this universe. Biologist Stephen Jay Gould talked about the old standard of measurement of an English yard that was calculated as the distance from the King of England's nose to the tip of his outstretched hand. If that span represented the history of our universe, one stroke of a nail file on the king's fingernail would erase the sum total of all human history.<sup>1</sup> Looking back over the history of time, over the brief period of human civilization, and toward the horizon of God's heaven-sent new creation helps us stay humble as we wait patiently.

Second, if you believe that what you're doing is meant to last, then you'll likely be more thoughtful and patient in your actions now. A good friend recently asked me what I wanted my legacy to be here at ELPC. I really hadn't thought a lot about that, since I'm regularly occupied with preparing for worship, answering emails, and helping the staff get through another week of events in this busy church.

I suppose I would want my legacy to be sure ELPC is healthy, active, in a well-tended building, and committed to Christ's work of justice and inclusion for all the years ahead. Have you thought about your own legacy? Ralph Waldo Emerson has suggested that a good legacy is this: *To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch or a redeemed social condition; to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived, that is to have succeeded.*

What is your legacy? Or better, what would be a faithful legacy that uses your God-given gifts for the needs of today and the aspirations of tomorrow? In this season of Christmas commercialism, stop and consider if there is a gift you can give someone that helps them live into their legacy—that lets them know they are special and that their time here on earth is worthwhile. Our passage from James 5 reminded us to be patient, looking to the coming of the Lord. Then it offered a second piece of advice: Strengthen your hearts. Hopefully you all get some exercise every day and try to eat healthy foods. How about working on your heart strength as well? Picture your heart pumping blood through your veins so you can reach out and help someone, so you can feel passion and excitement for a cause or correcting a wrong, so you can remember you are alive right now—and while that will not always be true of us, for now there is a lot that can be accomplished with a faithful spirit and a strong heart.

Victor Frankl was a World War II holocaust survivor who, when asked what is the meaning of life, was quick to push back that there is no single meaning of life. Life's meaning varies from person to person and sometimes from day to day and hour to hour. Frankl said you can't come up to a chess champion and ask, "What is the best chess move in the world?" There is no such thing as the "best move" apart from the particular game you're playing and the specific opponent you're playing against. Frankl argued that the same is true of life. Each of us has unique gifts, a unique story and setting in life that is special and not repeatable.<sup>2</sup> The best choice for us is what is true and just and loving right now, right where you are and right with whom you're with. That requires not just a good heart, but a strong heart. And that requires not just patience, but active patience.

Active patience? Isn't that a contradiction in terms? No, it's not. The farmers may be patient waiting for the early and late rains, but they are not twiddling their thumbs sitting in rocking chairs. They are preparing the soil, pulling weeds, making sure the harvest equipment is ready. Passive patience is rarely advisable— sitting around helpless, shrugging shoulders as if there is nothing constructive that can be done while you wait. Patience masquerading as passivity in the face of injustice is sinful; patience in the face of suffering, of abuse or violence is never faithful. Active patience is alert—waiting and watching and working for what is just and loving and righteous and legacy-building even as we await the coming day of the Lord. In the passage Heather read from Matthew 11, followers of John the Baptist confronted Jesus and said, "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered not with words of passivity, but of faithful activity: *Tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.* The days with Jesus Christ were not the final days, but

they pointed to the fullness of the coming realm of God—and all our time is to be spent in similarly active, patient, and faithful living.

Our passage from James ends with a strange couple of verses about not swearing oaths—which, if you think about it, is another example of active patience. When you are asked a question, one of the Ten Commandments tells us “thou shalt not lie.” If we are called upon to give testimony, whether in court or to a friend, or frankly to an enemy or stranger, we are to tell the truth—to let our “yes” be “yes” and our “no” be “no.” If we constantly run around having to swear to God that something is so, at some point, we’ll be mistaken—or worse, we’ll tell a lie. Better it is to be a person of integrity in all things—words and deeds. Don’t swear; simply speak what is true—actively, patiently, creating a legacy of righteousness by your actions of integrity.

I’ve likely told this story before, but once when I was in high school, the phone rang late one night and a neighbor called to tell my father that someone had just driven through the fence on the west side of our property and damaged it. So my dad called for me, put some tools in the back of his pick-up truck and drove slowly along that side of the farm looking for the busted fence. As we crested a small hill, we saw two teenagers in a car with a damaged front grill trying to get back onto the gravel road. Behind them you could see the skid marks and the broken barbed-wire fence. My dad pulled the truck right toward them, headlights blazing, and slowly got out. He went to their window and said, “Are you the ones that ran into my fence?” Sheepishly the boy and his girlfriend nodded. My dad paused, patient in his response, and then he said, “Well, I suppose you’d better get out and help me fix it.” No shouting, no abuse. Something was wrong that needed to be made right. A “Yes” was “yes” just as a “no” was “no.” Wrong wasn’t passively endured, but actively and patiently confronted.

As Christians, as a part of a Christian church like ours or any other, we live now knowing that the meaning of life isn’t something grand or elusive. Rather it involves a steadfast integrity that walks as it talks, that lives out what it believes, that repents what is wrong and sinful, and trusts that no earthly power or unearthly evil can truly vanquish God’s plans for all humankind. That is our guiding thought when our eyes gratefully open in the morning and when they confidently close upon our pillows at night. So be patient, beloved – be actively patient. Live today, planting and planning and preparing a legacy for tomorrow – until the child of Bethlehem comes to all of us once again.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, quoted by Joanna Adams, Feasting on the Word, Advent 3, Year A, *Homiletical essay*

<sup>2</sup> Victor Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning, pp. 171-2.