

**First Presbyterian Church  
Southampton, New York  
“Synchronizing Our Watches”**

**Psalm 89: 1 – 4, 19 – 26  
James 5: 7 – 10**

**Fourth Sunday of Advent**

**December 21, 2014**

*“Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord’s coming.”*

So the Apostle James counseled the fledgling Christian community, as it began to organize itself for a life of ministry and discipleship... waiting for the day to come, when Jesus would return and establish His kingdom on earth.

*“Be... patient.”*

Wow, talk about your timely messages from Scripture! There may be few areas where life in our twenty-first century world connects more directly with the first century world of the New Testament... than with this counsel from James! I mean, when it comes to foot-tapping *im*-patience, modern American culture may have set the gold standard for all of human history! I don’t know about you, but few things are more frustrating to me than having to wait and exercise patience... when I’m ready for something to happen *right now!*

For example, this week, I got behind some guy on Hill Street doing twenty miles an hour... from the movie theater, all the way to the fire station at St. Andrews Road. By the time I turned off, I had steam coming out my ears! If it takes my computer a few extra seconds to connect to the internet... I’m shaking my head at the screen, wondering what’s the stinking hold-up?

I recently wanted to use the self-checkout lane at Waldbaum’s, to save some time... and all the registers were occupied by shoppers who apparently found the process only slightly less confusing than nuclear physics; including a lady with a cart jammed so full of stuff that there wasn’t even room for it all in the bagging area next to the register. So I’m standing there getting more and more frustrated... while people over in the regular check-out lines are going through, zoom... zoom... zoom! And if, heaven forbid, my sermon drags on past the magic 18 minute mark... well, we don’t even want to think about that!

We do a lot of our shopping on the high-speed internet... We buy our gasoline with a half-second swipe of our favorite credit card... We cook our meals with the help of a microwave oven (well, at least that’s the way *I* cook)... And Kelly D’Angelo sends out the minutes of our Mission Council meetings in less time than it takes me to walk *from* the meeting, in the Founders’ Room, *to* my office 50 feet down the hall; because she takes the minutes on her laptop computer, and just hits “send” when the meeting’s over!

We live in the age of instant gratification... and if we have to wait too long for anything, we get antsy, and irritated, and... impatient! But be that as it may, the need for patience is, whether we like it or not, an unavoidable part of life.

Our young children are learning all about the need for *patience*... as the days till Christmas morning count down with agonizing slowness! Even after we order something over the internet, we still have to have *patience* as we wait for it to be delivered... at least until somebody figures out a way to de-materialize things, and transport them at the speed of light, like they did on Star Trek. When the doctor runs tests to find out why we're not feeling well, we have to have *patience* until the results come back. When the chaos and volatility of world events leave us feeling vulnerable and afraid, we have to have *patience* as our leaders work for peace and greater security. And on and on it goes.

There's no doubt about the fact that each and every one of us is very well acquainted with the undeniable need for patience. And so, too, was the Christian church of James' day. For James and his contemporaries, life was as full of vulnerability and uncertainty as it is right now. Christian people of the first century had to deal with the painful reality that things didn't always work out the way they wanted, just as we do today.

Remember, the first century was a dangerous time for the church. It was a time when the Christian community was very much a minority group. It was a time when the church's future was anything but settled... when its survival was by no means assured. Two more centuries would pass before the Roman Empire would embrace Christianity as the official state religion. And before that time there would be persecution and trials... much suffering, and lots of fear.

And it was to that church, at that time, that James said, "Be patient..." meaning, literally, "resist wrath and revenge." In other words, when you face difficult times, don't give up the hope that is in you; when things don't go your way, don't throw your faith away in anger; when life brings you heartache and pain, don't exact vengeance on God and the people who torment you.

Instead, James counsels, take a step back and remember that Almighty God is still in control... that His plan and purpose is still working out according to His will and timing. Be patient, and remember that there is more to your life than meets the eye; that there's more to your existence than the pain you're suffering; that God's love for you is great, and permanent, and far more powerful than any tragedy which might befall you.

And understand, this is no mere superficial brand of patience that James is calling for. When James talks about "patience" in the context of this letter, he's not talking about the kind of patience you need when you're fixing the sink, or potty training a child, or working on your taxes. It's not the kind of patience that we ask of our kids when, ten minutes into a 500 mile car trip, they ask, "Are we almost there yet?" *That* kind of patience certainly has its place in our lives... but the patience to which James calls us is far more important.

Because James is reminding his readers to keep before their eyes the reality of God's Lordship... and he's recommending an approach to life which really takes

seriously Jesus promise that He will return someday, and set things right in this world. James' brand of patience says to us:

*“Order your priorities and govern your actions on the basis of the hope you have in God’s faithfulness... and not on the basis of the frustrations that you feel because of life’s difficulties.”*

And, as Christian disciples, it's crucial that we try to maintain that approach to life... because, as we know, there's simply no guarantee that we're going to get a free pass on pain and suffering, just because we're followers of Jesus. James was well aware of the fact that suffering is an unavoidable part of life... for Christians and pagans alike. But James reminds us that we can bear suffering, and that we can face hard times without being wiped out spiritually, because God is *still* in control... because Jesus *will* return one day... and because a higher purpose for our lives and our world *is going to* be realized!

So, James counsels us to continue to look forward to the coming of Christ and the deliverance of God... even if life's in turmoil all around us. He urges us to remember that we don't control our lives as much as we like to think we do. He reminds us that God's timing takes precedence over our own agendas, and our carefully laid plans for the way that life should go. James challenges us to admit that we're in God's hands, not He in ours; that He is the potter and we are the clay; that He sees the full purpose of His creation, and our place in it, when we can see just a fraction of it all. He invites us to believe that even in our hour of greatest need... even on the day of our most bitter disappointment... even in the face of our deepest fear... our Heavenly Father loves us!

And that we can live our lives, and set our priorities, and make our decisions, on the basis of that love, and not on the basis of the despair that our circumstances may sometimes cause us to feel. When we think of patience in this way, we realize that it's not just a mark of character... that it's not just a personality trait that some people have, while others do not. We understand that patience isn't just holding your breath and counting to ten and trying not to lose your temper.

No, to have James' kind of patience is to make a serious statement of faith in the promise of God's providence and love. It's to make a profound statement of hope in God's deliverance, even when God seems so very far away.

To have this kind of patience is to believe that our endurance and our waiting and our bearing of pain has not been, and will not be, in vain... because we are loved by God and not forgotten by Him. This kind of patience is the mark of a mature relationship with Jesus Christ... it's the fruit of a life lived in the confidence of God's grace.

As James pointed out, it's the kind of patience which enabled the Old Testament prophets to endure oppression, torment, and suffering... even though they were simply being faithful to God. Jeremiah was beaten up, thrown in the stocks, and imprisoned in a dungeon, all for telling an unpopular truth; Hosea endured the pain of an unfaithful spouse and a broken marriage; Daniel went to the lion's den, just for worshiping God as we are this morning.

In all these cases, and many others, it was the patience of which James wrote which helped these servants of God to carry on... to hang on to their hope... and to remain faithful, even against the odds.

And it was this same kind of patience which enabled Paul the Apostle to endure shipwrecks, beatings, floggings, and imprisonment as he went about his work as a missionary... and still be able to write to the Philippians that: "Nothing can happen to me which can outweigh the supreme knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord!"

It was this kind of patience which enabled Jesus to endure the cross; which enabled Him to pray to God, "Not my will be done, but thy will;" which enabled Him to say on behalf of His executioners, "Forgive them, Father, for they do not know what they're doing."

And it's this same kind of patience which will enable you and me to persevere in our own faith, even when a dear loved one lies seriously ill, and we and our doctors can do nothing to help them. It will enable us to persevere in hope, even when a child or a parent or some other loved one is going through one of the dark valleys of life, and they won't allow us to do anything to help them. It will enable us to persevere in trust, even when our society and our economy seem to be standing on their heads... even when our best laid plans don't work out the way we want them to... even when we face individuals and institutions in our community who could care less what our faith and our church actually stand for. It will enable us to hang on, even when life gives us too much to handle... even when our responsibilities seem too great to bear... even when we're at our wits end, and we can't understand *what* God is doing with our lives, or where He's trying to lead us.

It's at *those* times in our lives, more than any other, that the words of James come through to us... loudly and clearly:

*"Be patient dear brothers and sisters... be patient."*

All is not lost... Jesus will return... the best is yet to come! That truth is the anchor that holds our lives together. It's the rock on which we take our stand in life. For if we don't belong to God... to whom *do* we belong? If Jesus is never coming back, if God is finished and done with us, then to whose plan for the future will we give our allegiance? If we can't entrust our deepest hurts, our greatest fears, our highest hopes, to the God who made us and loves us... to whom can these things be entrusted?

As we celebrate Christmas this year, let's celebrate the truth of James' words... which assure us that our hope in the Lord is not, and never will be, in vain: Jesus Christ has come! And He will come back some day! And we can take heart, and have courage, in the knowledge that we are always in His mighty hands!

That's the message of Christmas... and that's the promise of the Gospel! May we patiently trust that promise, all the days of our life!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!