
SUFFERING PATIENCE

JAMES 5:7-11

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
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Reading James isn't for wimps. He's a serious person of faith not because he may be the brother of Jesus but because he doesn't pull any religious punches. James, with his sanctified lips, calls for "pure and undefiled religion." He condemns friendship with the world and judging each other and boasting about tomorrow. He exhorts us to tame the tongue, to be careful of envy and selfish ambition, and reminds us that faith without works is dead. He's serious about faith. Be doers of the word and not merely hearers. Critical to his practical theology is loving one's neighbor as yourself. James' faith has its feet on the ground. "Religion that is pure and undefiled...is...to care for orphans and widows in their distress...."

He's serious about this thing we call faith. How do I know? I know because he takes human suffering seriously. "In their distress." That's how I know. A faith that doesn't take suffering into account is not a faith that follows a crucified God in Jesus Christ. In second verse of the book, he tackles suffering—"whenever you face trials of any kind..." (1:2). Reading James isn't for wimps. Whenever you face trials. Not if, but when! He's a realist about faith, not lost in fantasies of lights and mistletoe and trees and apple cider and hot cocoa and elves and reindeer and Santa Claus is coming to town. He cuts through commercialized Christmas and reminds us of human suffering.

He teaches about controlling the tongue but his tongue unleashes a linguistic lashing against the rich of his day: "Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court?" "the rich will disappear like a flower in the field...they will wither away." And directly before our lectionary passage, James says, "Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire." This is James. I told you reading James is not for wimps.

He is so serious about faith and the suffering caused by others and the suffering ones. Those in distress. Those who have labored but not been paid. Those who have been murdered though innocent. James helps us confront human suffering this Advent—the trials of any kind that you may face. He takes suffering seriously. And through his words, he reveals how the feet of class oppression can stomp on those who are poor or somehow socially marginalized like the orphans and widows in distress, even if unintentional.

Elephant and Mouse were best friends. One day Elephant said, "Mouse, let's have a party!" Animals came from everywhere. They ate, drank, sang, and danced. And no one celebrated more and danced harder than Elephant. After the party was over, Elephant exclaimed, "Mouse, did you ever go to a better party? What a blast!" But Mouse didn't answer. "Mouse, where are you?" Elephant called. He looked around for his friend and then shrieked in horror. There at Elephant's feet lay Mouse. His little body, ground into the dirt. He had been smashed by the big feet of his exuberant friend, Elephant (*When Helping Hurts*). Elephant didn't mean to do harm to his good buddy, but he did. He didn't understand that his joy was his friend's sorrow. That his plenty was mouse's empty. That his party caused another pain. That his exuberant life meant his friend's death, even unintentionally. I'm not sure Elephant loved his neighbor, Mouse, as himself.

There are people enduring suffering, unintentionally and intentionally, this Advent, and for them it may feel as if an elephant's foot is right on top of them, suffocating the joy, the peace, the love out of their lives. Reading James is not for wimps. Not only because of his attention to suffering but his emphasis on patience in the midst of suffering—a call to patience to the suffering ones. Waiting isn't for wimps either.

The ones who bear the weight of oppression are supposed to be patient? Isn't that just a tool of the empire—the encouragement to be patient? Easy for you to say when you haven't been in and out of the hospital for

tests and still don't know the diagnosis? Easy for you to say when you haven't endured the emotional abuse that has led to drug addiction? Easy for you to say when you haven't been praying for years for the healing of a broken relationship? Be patient? But this is exactly what James exhorts those who are suffering.

Be patient, beloved. Farmers are patient. You, be patient. Blessed are those who show endurance. James believes that faith produces endurance and endurance helps you mature. But come on James, there are better and easier ways to help us grow! Yet maybe there is some truth to the saying, "No pain, no gain." Be patient. Waiting is not easy, especially when suffering.

We are in an email world now, not snail mail. Christmas decorations even go up before Halloween these days. Black Friday shopping now starts on Thursday evening, not even Friday! We can't wait. We want everything now. Our answer. Our healing. Our justice. Our resolution. Now. But "the farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains." A farmer waits. Faith waits. The seed, the entire crop, are planted, but will the rain come? When will the rain come? When you have to wait, you realize that you aren't in control. Waiting is hard, especially waiting during a season of suffering.

In her book, *Gospel Medicine*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "If waiting is an aggravation, it is at least partly because we do not like being reminded of our limits. We like doing—earning, buying, selling, building, planting, driving, baking—making things happen, whereas waiting is essentially a matter of being—stopping, sitting, listening, looking, breathing, wondering, praying. It can feel pretty helpless to wait for someone or something that is not here yet and that will or will not arrive in its own good time, which is not the same thing as our own good time."

Waiting amid suffering is hard. Grace lived in a one room shack in Uganda. They found her lying on the floor, writhing in agony. The fleas were her only companion on that level as they flew around a few morsels of food on a plate. Grace couldn't even lift her head or barely whisper. She had tonsillitis but because she was poor and had HIV, the local hospital refused to treat her. She was suffering. So out of desperation, Grace paid a neighbor to cut out her tonsils with a kitchen knife (*When Helping Hurts*). How long do suffering people have to wait to get some relief? Grace, who eventually survived when someone got her penicillin, experienced the triad of suffering—she was poor, HIV positive, and had tonsillitis. Waiting is not for wimps, especially when the elephant feet of oppression are stomping the life out of you.

James writes to the oppressed. That's who he's telling to be patient. Be patient, beloved. This is countercultural as we wait like a farmer for fruit to grow—when and if, we don't know. Patience is antithetical to a life of grasping and exploitation and embraces delayed gratification or deferred resolution. Whenever you face trials, whenever you are in distress, be patient. There is patience in suffering but one could experience patience as a type of suffering too. We have to suffer patience, endure it, as part of the life of faith. There's no way around it. Waiting is in the DNA of Christian discipleship. But maybe we don't want to wait because we don't want to suffer. Waiting is a kind of aching. Patience can be painful. Waiting for restoration of justice for those innocent but yet still locked up behind bars. Waiting for a relationship with your child to be reconciled after many years. Waiting is a kind of suffering, aching, its own type of groaning. Actually, when James tells his hearers not to grumble against one another, it can also mean "don't groan in travail" against one another. All creation is groaning (Rom 8), aching, suffering, and so don't turn your groans, your agony, against each other and become bitter and judgmental. In other words, as the saying goes, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." What James insists on, while we are patient in the midst of suffering, is to pray for each other in community. After our lectionary passage, he asks, "Are any among you suffering? They should pray" and call on the elders of the church. Suffering is hard. Waiting is hard. But members of the community of faith are to watch over and care for each other. This reminds us that we are not alone in our suffering. We still wait but do so together. And God is with us. As James says, "the Lord is compassionate and merciful." We may be waiting on God but consider how long God has been waiting on us.

The Christian life is one long season of waiting. We are waiting for God to fulfill God's promises. Every Advent reminds us that we are still waiting. Job is lifted up by James as a model of one who suffered patience and

endured, but who wants to go through what he did? I told you reading James is not for wimps. Job lost all his property and children and was inflicted with loathsome sores all over his body. In the end, his fortunes were restored and God gave him twice as much as he had before; but he never saw his family who died earlier, again. Some things in life are never resolved. What we lose, we never gain again. Yet, we endure with patience.

Advent shows us that the Christian life is a holy waiting room. The issues, the suffering, you endure, may never be resolved because life is open-ended as you wait. Open, not closed or resolved nice and neatly. The resurrection is an opening, an open tomb as the womb of our future, but the future is still open which is why we wait, regardless of our situation. We wait because life is not closed in on us.

We are in another Advent waiting for a coming. We are still waiting. It's not resolved. Waiting can hurt while we suffer patience. But the wisdom of Howard Thurman might be helpful here when he writes "that there [may be] a special ministry of unfulfillment. It may be that the persistent hunger is an Angel of Light, carrying out a particular assignment in life." And this may lead to words of humility on our lips—"Teach me, the patience of unanswered prayer." What is unresolved may be where you find redemption.

Some have been waiting in suffering for a very long time. And the truth is that in this life, following Jesus, it is not about the parties, but the patience. Not about the answers, but the questions. Not about the win, but the wait. "Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord" (Psalm 27).