

## St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Shawnee

*Fr. Jonathan Brice, 29 March 2020*

As I prepared my message this week, I felt God leading me to the word "patience." In the past two weeks, life as we know it has shifted. We are disoriented, and it feels uncomfortable.

We know physically distancing ourselves is the socially responsible thing to do. Yet isolating within our homes is challenging and has economic consequences. We know these drastic actions will slow down the transmission of the virus, so our health care system can better cope with demand and lives can be saved. Yet we have a long uncharted journey ahead. Perhaps that's why God is whispering to us, "Patience." This journey will require patience.

We know patience is a highly-valued character trait. You can't inherit it, or buy it. It is even harder to come by than toilet paper or hand sanitizer! Patience must grow deep within us, before it shows outwardly in our lives.

Growing patience, is like growing bamboo. Growing bamboo trees requires a lot of nurturing through water, fertile soil, and sunshine. Farmers plant a bamboo seed, water the spot and add fertilizer for a whole year, and nothing happens. In spite all the nurturing, there are no visible signs of growth. Then there's a second year of watering and fertilizer, yet there is again NO GROWTH above the soil. Fast forward to year three and four, and still there is no sign of growth. Imagine four years of faithful nurturing, and NOTHING to show for our efforts! Our patience is tested, and we begin to wonder if we will ever be rewarded. We start to doubt ourselves and question the value of investing our time and energy. Inevitably, many people grow weary and quit. But then finally in the fifth year – something amazing happens. In just six weeks, the Chinese bamboo tree grows 80 feet tall! Imagine that! It's almost like it grows before your eyes!

Did the bamboo do nothing for four years only to grow exponentially in the fifth? No, for the first 4 years, the tree was growing underground, developing a root system strong enough to support its outward growth in the fifth year and beyond. Without the strong and unseen foundation, it could not have sustained such towering growth.

The same is true with our faith. In the midst of adversity, we grow stronger by overcoming challenges. As we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, we may not realize we are making progress, but there is change happening within us. If the bamboo tree farmer dug up his little seed every year to see if it was growing, he would stunt the tree's growth. In the same way, our own self-doubt, anxiety and fear can stop or slow down the growth of patience. When times are hard, and we are growing those unseen roots of patience, we must have faith.

Unlike the growth cycle of the bamboo tree, I hope our present circumstances do not last five years. However, we need to invite the Holy Spirit to cultivate patience in our hearts, to equip us for the journey ahead. We would all love to have the virtue of patience, yet we know it does not come easily. We will need to remind each other, with love and good humor, that something deeper is happening within us. Let's see what we can learn from David.

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Psalm 40 starts with David's words, "I waited patiently for the Lord!" David had been going through a hard time when he wrote Psalm 40. In other Psalms, he talks about sickness of the body or of the insults of his enemies. Psalm 40 focuses more on inward anxiety, or a troubled mind and spirit. Listening to you this week, and hearing from our St. Luke's Vines and Branches reports, I know this resonates with us right now.

The struggle is real. The more David tried to get out, the more bogged down he became. He says, "I waited patiently" . . . which implies it had gone on for some time, perhaps weeks or months or even a season of despair. Anxiety multiplies when we feel God is far away, or when we are fearful about the future. At some point, we have all been stuck in the horrible pit of worry. We get sucked in to that unanswerable question: "Why is this happening? Why me?" Fear is a natural human response. Yet in times of trouble, we mere humans have another option.

Our Heavenly Father offers us His perfect love, which casts out all fear. This reminds us that the opposite of love is not hate . . . the opposite of love is fear. When fear raises its head, instead of asking, "Why is this happening to me?", we can wrap ourselves in the love of God, and ask our Heavenly Father, "What are you saying to me? What am I meant to learn through this lesson of patience?"

In the trials of life, there is seldom a simple, straight forward or easy answer. Often, we cannot change what has happened, but we can change how we think about it. We can change how we respond to any issue. The good news is that instead of just changing our thinking, God renews our thinking, and renews our mind. Through the Holy Spirit, He gives us more.

Let's go back to Psalm 40, and see what power and encouragement we can find there: As David waited patiently, God pulled him out of a dangerous pit of despondency and despair. David waited, and God did for David what he could not do for himself. God answered his prayers and set him safely on a rock, and made him secure. From being bogged in the muddy mire, to standing tall on a rock -- what a wonderful transformation. We are reminded that God is our rock, our fortress, our deliverer.

I can't help wondering whether David's transformation in our Psalm was in the actual situation or in his attitude to it. It's so easy to get bogged down in the things of the world, the cares, woes and grind of life. When we do this, our horizon shrinks.

However, when the Holy Spirit touches us, we are drawn back to God. It might be through something beautiful: a flower, a song, a smile, a photograph, a kindness from someone, or through reading Scriptures . . . suddenly the Holy Spirit gets our attention, and the dark clouds dissipate and the way forward becomes much less daunting. We realise that God has been there all the time, and our eyes are opened to the innumerable blessings He gives. As we look back, we see His faithfulness to us. What a difference, what delight, what peace and purpose comes when He helps us we see things from His perspective and not from our limited human one.

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God is faithful, that is His nature. He cannot be anything else. He lifts us from the miry clay. He gives us grace to cope. He wants to bless us, His people, so that we will be a blessing to the hurting. And He is faithful to the end, not just in this life, but leading us into the wonder that awaits beyond this world.

As I prepared this sermon on patience, I kept picturing a jigsaw puzzle. Quite often in life, we try to fit the pieces together, one at a time, or maybe a cluster at a time. But we don't have the luxury of looking at the front of the puzzle box, to see the bigger, finished picture. Instead, we must work with what we have, and watch the pieces slowly coming together. We don't get to see the final picture before we start, or even when we are half way through!

This "waiting" period, as we work with the pieces we have, is a lesson of trusting God, and having patience until we can glimpse the bigger picture of His plan. Sometimes the waiting periods are just as important as the times when we act, just like the years of growing beneath the surface are vital for the healthy growth of the 80-foot-tall bamboo tree.

If we could see the finished picture of our lives on the front of the jigsaw puzzle box right now, it might make us feel overwhelmed and underequipped. We might try to alter the image and shape it into something we think is better suited for us.

As Christians, we entrust our lives to God, and know that His plan for us is greater than anything we could possibly imagine. Patience means waiting on the Lord. It builds us up spiritually and gives us a sense of peace in our lives. God is listening, and He is always there for you!

We have the ear of the God of the universe. That is our incentive to wait patiently for the Lord! And it gets better. Not only does the Psalmist declare that God is listening - but that He also acts on our behalf. David writes, "He drew me up from the desolate pit, set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure."

God is renewing us daily! We can trust Him to perfectly fit together all the pieces of our lives. And as we wait on Him, we will find that life is more precious than we have ever dreamed, richer than we have dared to imagine, and greater than we could ever have envisioned.

Waiting patiently for the Lord is an active step of faith. When we place our absolute trust in the One who knows us best, He gives us "a new song" in our hearts.

As we begin this new week, let go and let God take control,  
In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. AMEN