

THE PATIENCE OF SIMEON

Shall we start in the middle? What other choice have we? When have we ever been in on the beginning of anything? In any case, the essence of Advent is **waiting**. Advent before event. It isn't here yet. We can maybe feel it coming. But it isn't here yet. Moreover, there is no use trying to proceed – trying to move forward – until the new possibility is here. If something new is really coming into the world – into our spectrum of reality – we only spin wheels and waste time if we try to move on without it: before it is here. It is frequently more serious than that. If we do not wait for it, we may actually get busy, distracted, or so worn out that we will miss it when it does come. Most certainly that is a huge issue when it comes to the real Christmas.

The essence of Advent is **waiting**. But the essence of waiting is **patience**. I suppose we seldom think of “patience” as a gift or an obligation or a tribute we offer to God. Yet patience is a prerequisite for true waiting. We aren't just putting in time. We aren't just twiddling our thumbs. Patience is focused and committed. Patience already has the goal in mind. Patience is already loyal and indiscourageable. Patience, added to the waiting, means we will not swerve to the right or left; we will not quit; we will not run off after other purposes or be talked into any substitutes. Patience is one of the great concepts from a former age that has now been trivialized until it is hardly recognizable.

Sometimes a child is getting restless, and maybe whining more and more, and perhaps even working up to some kind of rebellious or naughty tantrum. And we hear the parent say, “Be patient!” What does that mean? In the old language, that would have meant, “Never give up on what you are hoping for – never quit wanting what it is that you truly want.” That is almost the reverse of what the parent means. For most people today, “patience” means cut the power; stop the passion; cool it; turn away from what you really want and care about; stop making waves – stop causing trouble. True patience is the reverse of all this: Keep totally focused on the goal. Let nothing dissuade you. The world may block or stop you for the moment, but if you are patient, it cannot sidetrack you or turn you away from your goal.

The essence of Advent is **waiting**. The essence of waiting is **patience**. And the essence of patience is **trust**. How does a mere human come into the qualities of waiting or patience? Such things cannot come out of

nowhere. Oh, to be sure, some humans are stubborn, bull-headed – very eager to get what they want and to have things their own way. But these attributes have very little stature in comparison to “waiting” or “patience.” Being merely willful or self-centered does not keep us discouragable; it does not keep us faithful or true.

The secret ingredient is trust. We learn to wait, and we learn true patience as we come to trust God more and more. We catch a glimpse of what God seems to want; of what God is doing; of how God is working; of where God is taking things. Then we wait for it! Then we work for it too, with patience. It isn't here yet, but it's coming. It isn't fulfilled yet, but it will be. We know this is true only if we trust God. We cannot produce all the passion and purpose that then arises within us; our trust in God provides it. It picks us up, draws us into the story, carries us along for however long it takes. The essence of patience is trust.

Have any of you ever been engaged in a task or a hope that will not come to completion in your lifetime? If not, your life is pretty small and bleak. We do not come fully alive until we get a hold of something that is far bigger than we are. Rumor has it that humans need something tangible, something almost within their grasp, or they will not be motivated to try very hard for very long. I could believe that, if all human history did not so thoroughly refute it. That is, it sounds logical to me, at first blush. It simply happens to be untrue. Yes, the hope has to be *real* to us or we do not respond very well. But we are not as tied to this world and this time as most people assume. Against all practical logic, humans can and do live for that which is way beyond them. Like it or not, many humans live for generations that have yet to be born; for possibilities far beyond their grasp; for a world and a life way beyond the one we experience in the here and now. One might almost suspect that we have some kind of Spirit within our physical shells – that we are more than flesh and blood; that we were created by some Being far higher than anything we have ever been able to define.

“Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done: We are your servants, in season and out of season. We wait for it with patience.” Does it feel like Advent to you? Whether it does or it doesn't, for a few minutes this morning we are going to ponder the story of old Simeon.

Joseph and Mary have gone to Jerusalem – they have gone to the temple. Jesus is about to reach His eighth day. Joseph and Mary want to circumcise their newborn son, according to the Law of Moses – as our

passage says, “to present him to the Lord.” I doubt if there has been any doubt, but if so, it is now erased: Mary and Joseph are devout Jews. Religion is not just an occasional hobby for them. Jesus is the firstborn. He belongs to God. Yes, of course, we all do – in theory and in truth. But a firstborn male belongs to God in a special and primary way. In the times before Abraham, Jesus would have been sacrificed in fact and for real – sacrificed to God on a real altar. But now, two thousand years after Abraham, Jesus still belongs to God, but He must be *redeemed* instead of sacrificed. A substitute sacrifice will be offered to God in place of Jesus Himself. And every devout Jew believed that it was God who had changed the rules. It makes it all the more sad and ludicrous that so many try to claim that Jesus would still be sacrificed to God years later – that this is the meaning of the Cross. But the Cross was not God’s doing. God did not kill Jesus; we did. And it was no godly or pious act. But let us stay with the passage for today.

The offering will be two turtledoves, or two pigeons. Joseph and Mary are not wealthy. If they were, they would offer a lamb. A lamb for THE LAMB would have been mystically poetic. Joseph and Mary are young and just getting started. Many have waxed eloquent on how very poor they were, and how humble were Jesus’ beginnings. But they are not poverty-stricken. Two turtledoves, not one, is up a notch. We need not miss the humble setting, but there is no need to exaggerate it either. And this offering at the time of circumcision is not intended as a burden or a hardship. It is intended for devotion, for celebration – a sign of faithfulness to God. From a religious perspective, God has rights over all human life. Does our culture still know this? Vaguely, if at all. Yet whether our culture does or does not know it, surely we know it.

But our focus for the moment is Simeon. We always picture him as “old,” though the passage never says so directly. The comment about “letting now thy servant depart in peace” does imply that Simeon believes his life is now fulfilled – now he can die in peace – having seen what he had hoped for and waited for all his life. He is clearly a seer – a prophet. He sees way beyond what any normal eyes can behold. “*This child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed [to many people, and to much of life as we have known it].*” To our kind of world – *in* our kind of world – this is no “Prince of Peace.” This is the *true* Prince of Peace: peace between us and God. That is a completely different matter. That will inevitably put terrible tension between us and this world, and sometimes far more than mere tension. We never get used to it, do we? This is not a sweet and pastel-shaded

story. We always want it to be. We deeply wish that it were. So much so that we are constantly trying to change the story – trying to doctor it up to make it look like what we wish it would look like. Every Christmas, all over the land, we do our best to celebrate the story as we wanted and hoped it would be. We want something sweet and nice for little children, not something real and terribly troubling – and challenging, demanding, and relentlessly life-changing – for adults.

“*A sword will pierce your own soul also.*” What is thrust into Jesus’ side will hit Mary as well. And that’s only a tiny piece of what Simeon is saying. Even some of *us* can identify. The increased spiritual awareness of conversion is not an unmixed blessing. It increases our awareness and compassion: our distress over all the anguish and alienation – all the anger and pain and stupidity – going on all over our world.

And now we do and must insist: Simeon has been “waiting” for this Messiah to appear *all of his life*. The essence of Advent is waiting. There is no other hope as far as Simeon is concerned. Israel, and Judaism itself, had been, by all human expectations, going under – going down for the full count. As always, God had more tricks up his sleeve than anybody could imagine. But the nation’s leaders were spiritually bankrupt. All the promises and hopes of Israel, as they had been outlined and set forth in the Old Covenant, were clearly dead or dying. None of it was heading toward the fulfillment of God’s promises, toward a Davidic Kingdom of peace and power as the prophets had proclaimed and imagined. It was headed instead toward a great destruction: the devastation of 70 A.D.

Simeon does not know how all this will work out. But some connection between Simeon and the Spirit and Presence of God tells him on the inside that this child is the ONE.

Do any of you want me to explain how this kind of awareness is possible? Such awareness is ever mysterious in our outer world. Few of us truly doubt the possibility, even if we hunger to minimize the whole affair into understandable and familiar categories that will fit into our human logic and explanations. Nevertheless, Simeon knows. He sees with an inner eye that has been in training – that has been focusing on unseen dimensions – for years. That’s what it means when we say he is “waiting.”

All of this is leading up to a comment – a sermon message, if you will – one that I dearly hope will light and lighten your life this Advent.

Simeon has waited all his life. But *that does not mean he has been sitting on his hands*. That does not mean he has been doing nothing in the outer world.

Simeon has been devout – a man of prayer and study – for years. But most of it is not seen in the outer world – it is not seen with WW eyes. The “way of the world” does not see God’s servants clearly, not even when it kills them (or it would not kill them). And neither does Simeon see Jesus with WW eyes – that is, with any kind of “way of the world” consciousness.

We have no biographical information about Simeon, but go with me for a moment anyway. None of this is actually known, you understand, yet all of it is exceedingly possible. Picture Simeon as a responsible householder – a patriarch of his own small clan. He has a wonderful if imperfect wife, as he himself is imperfect. He has five children and fourteen grandchildren. He has worked hard all his life to support his family, and the temple, and as many worthy causes as he could manage. He is a rug merchant with a shop in old Jerusalem. He is canny and shrewd or he wouldn’t have survived in business; this does not imply that he has been dishonest or greedy or immoral. Yet nobody looking from the outside would know that behind the surface, Simeon has been “waiting” for lo these many years. However much he loves his family, however much he has labored to survive and succeed in his business, and regardless of whatever status or position he has held in the community, they would not be able to tell that what Simeon really lives for, hopes for, and waits for is not discernible or definable in terms of anything that can be perceived by this world. Simeon waits for God to make his move. Simeon *trusts* God – despite any outer evidence for or against it, Simeon waits for God to send God’s Messiah.

Do we ever miss the implications? Simeon is old. Jesus has just been born. Simeon’s days of waiting and watching are over. He knows it has truly begun, and he is content. Joseph and Mary still have huge parts to play; maybe not in the outer and obvious realms, but it is nevertheless true. By all indications, Joseph will not live to see Jesus grow up. And Mary has another thirty years to wait and watch before the real drama of Jesus’ life and ministry begins to emerge. Peter and James and John are waiting and watching. They will find John the Baptist before they find their real Master. And even after they have found Jesus and gone with Him, they will wait and watch continually, trying to figure out what to do, how to respond: “How can we participate in

what is happening? How can we be faithful to Him?” In any given moment, they will not always get it right. Especially not at first. And after the Resurrection? Paul ends up as active and engaged as we can imagine any human ever being. Yet Paul constantly waits and watches: What to do next? Where to go next? When do you engage in some struggle, and when do you move on? And though Paul knows Jesus is the true Messiah – though Paul has encountered the Risen Lord – he is not living in a world of peace and unity. Paul still waits and watches for that, as he himself encounters more and more anger and animosity: Christians disagreeing with each other; great heresies beginning to form; increasing strife between those who believe in Jesus and those who do not. Yes, Paul is also waiting and watching – all the time. He is not sitting on his hands. Far from it. But he is waiting and watching for every new moment of guidance, every further instruction from the Holy Spirit of his Risen Lord.

The essence of Advent is waiting. It has not happened yet. And even for those of us who know that the New Kingdom has been introduced into our world, it is still far from fulfillment – far from completion. This waiting is not passive. This waiting is not about doing nothing. This waiting is on the inside. The essence of Advent is waiting. We wait for the true Christmas to dawn – to come into our world. And since we cannot bring it by any power that we possess, either we must abandon it – or we wait for it.

The essence of Advent is waiting. The essence of waiting is patience. Only, true patience is never passive. Real patience means that the goal is kept in sight, and never abandoned. Patience means we will not turn aside or quit or go after other goals – no matter what.

A warrior without patience is a dead man. A runner without patience will never reach the finish line. A human being without patience is a disaster – that is, a person without focus; a person with no concept of discipline; a person with no concept of pruning. Patience (patient endurance) is the second highest virtue of the Christian Life.

I frequently hear people quip about how they have no patience. They mock themselves, of course. And they also use definitions that are mere shadows of former concepts of power and meaning. But if we truly have no patience, we are indeed far from God, and far from any possibility of living for God’s Kingdom.

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The essence of Advent is waiting. The essence of waiting is patience. The essence of patience is trust. That is, trust is where patience comes from. We are patient when we trust in God. We become patient when we trust in God rather than in ourselves or the promises or possibilities of this world. Does it sink in? We are patient when our trust is in God. When and insofar as we do not trust God, we lose all our patience. Isn't that nice to know? Now we can have more patience whenever we want it. And we can lose patience whenever we no longer want it. The secret is in trusting God.

The essence of Advent is **waiting**. The essence of waiting is **patience**. The essence of patience is **trust**. Trust, as you know, is a synonym for **faith**.

May this Advent season bless and strengthen us all: not in do-gooding; not in some charade or chimera of generosity or skin-deep compassion – but in living and walking in the WAY of Jesus Christ our Lord.