

Memorize & Ponder

Brentwood Presbyterian Church
December 22, 2013

God's Patience

2 Peter 3:8-9
(142, 149, 150, 153)

I've always loved the first carol we sang this morning.
Up until this week,
I thought that my favourite version
was a classical arrangement
done by John Rutter and sung by the Cambridge Singers.

But looking into the roots of the carol,
I realize that I probably heard it first
when I was immersed in folk music
back in the 1960s and 1970s.
There's a great version by Joan Baez
and another by Peter, Paul, and Mary.
Listening to those this week
brought back memories
of the early years of the Mariposa Folk Festival
when it moved to Centre Island in Toronto in 1968.

I also discovered the story of the writing of this carol this week.
John Jacob Niles was an American folklorist.
He collected traditional songs,
especially from the Appalachian region in the United States.
His work was central to the revival of folk music during the 1960s
that shaped the imagination and aspirations of my generation.
He discovered the first line and the tune of this carol
at an evangelical fundraising meeting in Murphy, North Carolina,
in the summer of 1934,
after the group had been ordered out town by the police .
A young girl got up on the makeshift stage.
As Niles describes it in his unpublished autobiography:

Her clothes were unbelievable dirty and ragged, and she, too, was unwashed. Her ash-blond hair hung down in long skeins.... But, best of all, she was beautiful, and in her untutored way, she could sing. She smiled as she sang, smiled rather sadly, and sang only a single line of a song.

That song was 'I wonder as I wander.'
Niles composed the rest of the carol that fall
and debuted it in December of 1934
at the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, NC.

The opening words
capture for me so powerfully
so much of the Christian journey.
Wondering and wandering –
“What’s going on?”
“Where am I?”
“When will this be over?”
“What’s going to happen?”
“Is anyone there?”
“What’s this world all about, anyway?”

These are the great questions of any age.
These are the great questions of any group,
whether it’s a poor group of Appalachian evangelicals in the midst of the depression,
or a frightened group of Syrian refugees in the 2010s,
or an dumbstruck group of shepherds 2000 years ago,
or small church in the Philippines still dealing with hurricane devastation,
or a group of child soldiers in a jungle camp somewhere in Africa.

We in the developed West are impatient for answers.
All those groups, in their own ways,
are equally impatient.
How could they not be?
Why should they not be?
Why should we not be?

Which brings us to Peter’s second letter
and the passage we memorized and pondered this week.
Peter wrote to a community being persecuted.
The police of his day were coming down hard.
They wanted to get rid of this pesky, disruptive community
who followed an executed rebel who claimed to be God.
Some in the Christian community itself,
who had expected an early return of Christ in all his rebellious glory,
were frustrated and fomenting unrest within.

Peter counselled patience,
indeed, counselled God’s patience.
In essence, he argued that God was waiting
to allow more people to accept the invitation to reconciliation and salvation.

God is not in the rush that we are.
God works in his own way in his own time,
in which, Peter imagined, a thousand years of our time is but a day of God's.

That poses a pretty stark contrast!

So, my friends, you can't rush God.

But Peter's understanding of why God is delaying is worth considering.

God is using the time to persuade more people of the truth
revealed in Jesus, the Christ.

He is waiting for people to accept more deeply and more broadly
the grace offered most powerfully in a loving relationship
with the intimate community of the Holy Trinity –
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God wants everyone to get caught up in the dance of that community,
to get intrigued and entranced by the rhythms of righteousness and justice,
to move to the swing of *Shalom* or global well-being,
to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.

God's beloved children, created as free agents,
can be a stubborn, stuck, dare I say stupid, lot.
We'd probably reject them in our impatience.

But not God.

He keeps patiently chipping away at the stubbornness and the stupidity.

He works his wonders to get them unstuck.

He's got all the time in the world.

And he knows how it will all turn out,
because he's in charge.

Perhaps that's our greatest challenge with patience,
or at least with God's patience.

We want it to happen faster.

But it won't.

It will happen in God's time in God's way.

The better we understand and accept that,
the better contribution we will be able to make
to the building up of the Commonwealth of God
in our time and place.

We will help people to flourish rather than perish.

We will allow the Holy Trinity to be true to their promise in their way
and learn a lot about our own flourishing in relationship with them.

Here are a couple of key take aways,
for me at least,
from these reflections this morning.

First, it matters what we wonder about.
If, as was the case in Niles' carol,
we wonder about what God has done
coming in the flesh in Jesus, the Christ,
and remaining active in the world through the Holy Spirit,
then our attention is focused in the right place
for flourishing as God intends.
“What,” we should be wondering, “is God doing here and now
and how can I contribute the gifts they have given me?”

Second, God will bring all things to fruition in God's time.
Part of God's gift of grace is the gift of God's patience.
Testing and trying as this is at times,
it is an important Christian discipline –
creating the time and space for people,
including ourselves,
to be transformed by the God of blessing and truth.
We humans cling too strongly to our stuckness,
our stubbornness, and our stupidity.
It takes time and loving effort to break through them
In ways that reveal the true worth and dignity of humanity
sown by God deep within all of us.

That takes God's patience.

May that patience be imparted to us today.

*May God fill us all with the Spirit of LAFter this week,
with the joy of love, aspiration, and faith that we see in Jesus, the Christ,
as we go forth this week to bless the world.*

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