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Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28, 1 Timothy 1:12-17
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The Power of Patience

When I was a young boy, I had the joy of living close to my grandparents. As soon as I could ride a bike, I was able to ride over to their house for an afternoon of Coca Cola, peanut butter crackers and games of Chinese checkers. My grandmother would fix the snacks and my grandfather would play game after game of Chinese checkers with me. I can remember his sitting in a special chair in the living room, reading The Wall Street Journal. He would stop reading as we set up the game board on the footstool in front of his chair. Then, we would play game after game of jumping marbles on the star-shaped board, moving the marbles from one end of the board to the other. As long as I wanted to play, he played. He never seemed to get tired...at least he didn't show it. I don't remember him ever getting restless, hurrying me along or even sneaking a look at The Journal. When I look back on the hours we spent playing Chinese checkers, I realize he was a man of infinite patience. Through the time he gave me and the patience he showed me, I learned more and more about what it means to love and to be loved.

From the sound of things, God's patience is wearing thin with the land of Judah. God is ready to throw down the newspaper and upset the game board, sending marbles flying in every direction. Like a hot desert wind that strips the mountains bare and shrivels the vegetation on the plains, the anger of God is about to be unleashed upon the faithless people. Even the earth shall suffer the consequences of the sinful ways and open rebellion of the people. Jeremiah says that the birds will flee, the mountains will shake, the walls of Jerusalem will fall down and the bountiful earth will become a desert. The cultivated creation and the beloved community will return to chaos before the "fierce anger of God." (Jeremiah. 4:26) God has a fight to pick with the people who go by God's name. God is going to give them up to the consequences of their own actions.

It sounds as if all hope is lost in the face of the fierce wind of God's anger. Yet, in the midst of God's unrelenting judgment against Judah, we hear something new. God says, "The whole land shall be a desolation; yet, I will not make a full end." God is not only holy; God is also merciful. Though judgment will come and the people will go into exile, God will not forget the people. As the psalmist says, "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." (Psalm 145:8) God's patience does not end.

The prophet Hosea understands this same drama of justice and mercy that plays out in the heart of God. More than a century before Jeremiah, Hosea says that God is like a mother or father who teaches a toddler to walk and to speak. God surrounds every moment of the child's life with love. In spite of all this loving attention, the child grows up, runs away, gets into trouble and does not return the love. God's heart is broken and God is angry. Yet, God will not give the child up because God is also patient. God says, "How can I give you up...How can I hand you over...My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath." (Hosea 11:8, 9)

In the cross of Jesus Christ, we see this same drama of God's justice and God's mercy played out. The cross is both God's judgment upon the sinful world and God's boundless mercy poured out for the sinful world. In the cross, we see God's loving patience stretched out for the whole creation. In the cross, God says to you and me, "I will not make a full end. I will not give you up."

On the road to Damascus, Paul stumbles upon the power of God's patience to break and remake him. Before he encounters the risen Lord on the road, Paul is certain of one thing - he is a man who is doing the right thing. He is a righteous man who is faithful to his God. He knows that he is called to a life of obedience to God. He is so zealous for the faith that he takes it as his special mission to punish those whom he believes have fallen away from the true worship of God and are following Jesus. On the road to Damascus, he discovers that Jesus is the same Lord he has always known and loved. In

trying to do the right thing, he finds he has been doing the worst thing possible. He is persecuting those who follow the God he loves. Therefore, he throws himself utterly upon the mercy of God.

In his letter to Timothy, his young friend in the faith, Paul says that he is the foremost of sinners. He doesn't mean that he has been in more barroom brawls than anybody else. He doesn't mean he has broken commandments six through nine. He means he has broken God's heart. He has spent his life trying to destroy the very thing that God is building up. Trying to do the right thing, he has been doing the wrong thing. All the while, God has been patiently waiting for the right moment to reveal Christ to him. Surely, there must have been times when God was ready to go back to reading *The Wall Street Journal* or send Paul's game board flying. God waited patiently. I suspect that before that moment, if you had tried to explain the gospel truth to Paul, he would not have listened. If he had listened, he would not have believed it. The time was not yet right. God waited patiently for the right time. When that time came, Paul could say in the words of the beloved hymn, "I once was blind, but now I see."

Paul comes to see the power of God's infinite patience. Trusting in God's plan and in God's timing, Paul is free to witness to Christ and to leave the results in God's hands. He does not have to manipulate people or force some outcome. All he has to do is tell the truth and let his transformed life be a witness to that truth.

God's patience has the power to make us new people. For some, faith seems to come easily; for others, faith is a long, hard struggle. Some can never remember a time when they did not know the grace of Christ and the love of God; others can point to a particular moment when they came to a new understanding of God and Christ became real in their lives. When the Spirit awakens us to the truth of the gospel, we may wonder why we were asleep for so long. Why didn't we see it? However faith comes, all we can say is, "Thank you, Lord, for your grace!" and live lives of gratitude.

When we find ourselves worried about a friend, a child or a spouse who does not, by their own confession, seem to know the grace of God, God's patience teaches us to trust that they, too, are in God's hands. In his new book, *The Triune God*, Dr. Bill Placher of Wabash College writes:

"But faith, when it occurs, is God's doing. Rejoicing that God will sometimes make use of even our best efforts to the good of our sisters and brothers, we should put forth our best efforts of Christian witness – preaching, teaching, living out the Christian life. But we should do so with cheerful freedom that comes from knowing that no one's salvation ultimately depends on us. Everyone is in God's hands. Therefore it is not appropriate to grow impatient or angry with those who do not believe, or urge them to try harder. Rather, we should pray for them. And we should dwell with them as fellow pilgrims..." (p. 85)

God's patience teaches us patience. Patience teaches us to not judge others, manipulate others or give up hope. Patience teaches us to walk alongside of others in confident hope. Maybe that is why the love of grandparents is so special; they have learned the gift of patience, knowing the joy of walking alongside of a life that is in God's hands.

God's patience has the power to set us free from anxious fretting and turn us to decisive action. The recent movie, *Amazing Grace*, follows the life of William Wilberforce, the devout Christian and member of Parliament, who labored for decades for the abolition of the slave trade and, eventually, slavery itself within the British Empire. He endured opposition, ridicule and ill health to fight for this godly cause. He lived to see the slave trade abolished and to see the bill for the total abolition of slavery survive its third reading in the House of Commons. One month after his death in 1833, Parliament acted to abolish slavery. Wilberforce was buried in Westminster Abbey. On his statue in the Abbey, you can read these words:

"...his name will ever be specially identified with those exertions which, by the blessing of God, removed from England the guilt of the African slave trade, and prepared the way for the abolition of slavery in every colony of the empire: in the prosecution of these objects he relied, not in vain, on God; but in the progress he was called to endure...great opposition: he outlived, however, all enmity...here to repose: till, through the merits of Jesus Christ, his only redeemer and saviour... he shall rise in the resurrection of the just." ("William Wilberforce," *Wikipedia*).

He relied, not in vain, on God. He knew that God was working with great patience to end slavery. He knew that God would open the eyes of the British Parliament and people to see the light of God's truth.

God's patience shows us that God is not through with us, with the church or with the world. God is working in us to awaken the world to the truth of Jesus Christ. This coming year, we have an opportunity to take decisive steps forward in our witness for Christ. Due to a large gift to the Endowment of our church, all of the increased costs in the 2008 budget for personnel, programs and fixed expenses will be covered by the income from this gift. The Session has made a commitment that every gift to the church in 2008, over and above the 2007 level of giving, will go 100% for mission and benevolence. The Mission Committee has identified special local and global projects that need our hands-on assistance and our financial support. In the weeks ahead, you will be receiving information about this unique mission challenge. I believe that God has been waiting patiently for this moment so that we may take bold, decisive action to increase our giving and our hands-on labor in mission and service within and beyond our church.

We worship a God of infinite patience who comes to us to reassure our anxious hearts and to set us free to be bold witnesses for Christ knowing that the outcome is in God's hands.