

When patience wears thin—Third Sunday in Advent, Year A
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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One of my best childhood friends is massively pregnant. She's due in a few weeks, and she recently posted on Facebook that, "You never realize how great cold medicine is until you can't take it." My poor, dear friend, it turns out, was lying around her house eight months pregnant with a nasty sinus infection. That poor woman. I've listened over the months to her excitement at finding out she's pregnant. I've talked with her about the fun but scary task of telling the other kids that there will be a new sibling in the house. She has been so amazing during the entire process, though I think this week, she reached that important moment when she was utterly out of patience. She wants the baby BORN and sinus infection GONE.

The scripture lessons that we read during Advent know a thing or two about the ups and downs of waiting for something momentous to happen.

The prophet Isaiah tells us to be strong and to have no fear because God is surely coming. The prophet paints a vivid picture of the world that will come to us when God arrives and warns us to be strong as we wait for that promise to be fulfilled. Isaiah's world is one where all the infirmities that people suffer will be mended and all the crooked roads will be made straight and blessed. Isaiah invites us to be strong, to wait, until God fixes up all the cracks in the world.

Similarly, the Epistle of James invites us to be patient for the coming of the Lord—to nurture our hope in God's arrival the way that a farmer nurtures the little seeds and new sprouts. James tells us to strengthen our hearts for this period of waiting, of expectation.

Even the Gospel story focuses on John the Baptist's question about patience. John asks whether Jesus is the one we've all been waiting for or if we should be spending more time waiting for a different savior to come. John seems preoccupied with whether we are living in the right time, whether God really has come among us. I'm guessing that's a familiar question to a lot of us. Are you there God? Is this the right time? When God? When will this world be mended.? When will it be healed?

Patience, waiting, expectation. Our scriptures are filled with them. The scriptures might even seem to be filled with more patience than we sometimes feel. The Advent season with its images of pregnancy and of light slowly coming back into the world invites us year after year to ponder the spiritual gift of patience, the discipline of waiting.

I think the church sometimes wants us to think of patience like a painting of a saint somewhere up on top of a mountain—eyes slightly closed, hands clasped in prayers. Or maybe of some Eastern mystic, deep in meditation on the mysteries of the universe and the timing of God. I know that I feel a pressure to wait patiently for God—but also nicely and quietly.

But the truth is, patience doesn't always look like that. Waiting sometimes looks like my friend, suffering on her sofa and screaming to anyone who will listen "I have a sinus infection, and I am eight months pregnant!" Pass the antibiotics and get this baby born!

I can relate, and maybe you can too, to a more restless waiting—even an agitated waiting. I can relate to patience that hovers at the edge of my mind, elusive.

And yet, every year, right at this time, the scriptures call us to be patient and wait for God to come into the world in two weeks' time. I don't always feel up to that. I want justice now. I want peace now. I want all those promises that Isaiah makes to come true now. I want God NOW.

I know that the major miracle of the season will come in the manger on Christmas Eve. But I wonder if there are other little miracles floating around the season of Advent. One such miracle, as far as I can tell, is not so much that we magically reach a nirvana of patience and serenity. Unless you are very lucky, you won't be turned into a saint with arms clasped in prayer, quietly waiting for God. Even so, we worship a God who is quietly waiting for us. Who is serenely patient with us. Who is willing to wait for us. Even when we are sitting there, thrashing around with a sore nose and a pregnant body.

The truth is that God always comes. Always. It may not be in the manner that we expect, and it may not be at the time we expect. But God always comes. Those early people were looking for a king to ride in on a warhorse into the center of Jerusalem. And instead, God will be born in a manger in the little town of Bethlehem. It is precisely that kind of unexpected, unusual miracle that we practice waiting on.

So, please don't worry if your patience is a little thin. Don't be too concerned if the serenity of your waiting is a little frayed around the edges. God can handle it. And whatever we lack in patience in this life, God will supply gifts more than sufficient for our needs.

Even when you don't feel up to the task of waiting for God, God will wait for you. God will wait with God. And God, who knows all our frailties and our failings, will love you beyond all measure even when the waiting gets hard. Amen.