

“Love Is...Patient”

Isaiah 40:1-11; 2 Peter 3:8-15

As you heard last Sunday, I will be preaching for the next few weeks on the theme “Love Is . . .,” developing the theme introduced in November by our Stewardship Ministry.

Love is vast and complex and worth a few weeks of our attention, especially at Advent, because God is love and Advent is the season when love arrives wrapped up in the package of a human being. The fancy church word we use for that packaging material is incarnation. That’s what you and I are, when we are our best selves: we are the packaging material for divine love.

The Stewardship Ministry, from whom we heard earlier in the service, built this year's campaign of care on Paul's famous passage in his first letter to the church at Corinth:

"If I speak with a human or angelic voice but do not have love, I'm just a noisy, clanging gong," and so on, listing the futility of our lives, even souped-up spiritual lives, that are loveless.

And then, in verse four, Paul begins to define what love is:

"Love is patient, love is kind, love does not boast, it is not envious or proud," and then Paul continues for the next few verses telling us in a lyrical litany what love at its best looks like.

There's a reason Paul begins that long litany with the simple claim: "**Love is patient.**" He could have started anywhere—love is kind, love is not arrogant, love bears all

things—but he begins with patience. And perhaps it's because patience is the ground upon which everything else rests. Without patience, kindness becomes hurried and haphazard. Without patience, generosity becomes thin and conditional and begrudging and sour. Without patience, relationships break down under the strain of unmet hopes and unkept deadlines and unrealistic expectations.

Patience isn't simply a virtue; it is a way of being that makes love possible. And if Advent teaches us anything, it is this: **the God who loves the creation of which we are a part is unhurried.** God takes God's time—because love takes time.

The scientists who study big things get this; they know that God/love takes time. Francis Miller, my former co-pastor,

introduced me to the well-known words of the French priest and scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “Above all, trust in the slow work of God.” A paleontologist, as Teilhard was, or a paleontologist-in-the-making, as our young candlelighter, Henry, may turn out to be, understands the slow work of God, seeing it preserved in the fossil record.

Today’s scripture lessons remind us of this holy slowness in two quite different contexts.

Comfort in the Long Waiting

Second Isaiah, a prophet working during the Babylonian Exile of the Israelites about 550 years before Jesus, speaks to a people who have waited so long for hope that hope has started to feel foolish. For decades, exiled in

Babylon, God's chosen people have carried memories of their home and their mission like fragile glass. They wonder if God remembers them; they wonder if God still has plans for them; they wonder if all the promises spoken long ago still hold.

And into that exhausted uncertainty, God sends a word:

“Comfort, O comfort my people... Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.”

Not “hurry up, wipe your tears, get over it.”

Not “pull yourself together, you’re being dramatic.”

Not “I’ll help you once you’ve helped yourselves.”

But: **Comfort. Tenderness. Gentleness.** Isaiah does not scold a broken people; speaking on God’s behalf, the prophet offers words that only patience can speak.

And then comes the voice in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord... make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

This roadwork will take a minute. The valleys don't rise instantly. The mountains don't level in a day. The rough places don't become smooth overnight. God is preparing something new, but it's not with the speed of an Amazon Prime delivery. It's the slow healing of a people who have long been wounded, by themselves and others, and the careful rebuilding of trust in a heart long bruised, the gentle restoration of a community learning to hope again.

God's love is patient because **God understands the pace of human hearts**. God waits for us to grow into the promised love that we heard more about last week. The

exile did end. The people did rebuild. The beloved community did rise from the ashes.

The God Who Isn't in a Hurry

And then we turn to 2 Peter. Early Christians, too, grew anxious about timing. They believed Jesus would return quickly—maybe even in their own lifetime.

But years had passed. Some believers had died. The persecution that began with the crucifixion hadn't gone away. The world seemed unchanged. And people began to ask the question many still ask today: **“Where is God? What is God waiting for?”**

The unknown writer of 2 Peter responds with one of the most important lines in Scripture:

“With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.”

This is not math; it is mercy. It is not a cosmic time conversion chart; it is a portrait of divine love.

The text continues:

“The Lord is not slow, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”

God’s timing is not procrastination. It is compassion. God’s waiting is not indifference. It is grace. What we call history is the space God has created for us to grow into God’s image and likeness. And God is still patiently waiting.

God waits because God’s deepest desire is for healing, not haste.

God waits because transformation is slow work.

God waits because love, real love, cannot be rushed.

The early church wanted Jesus to return with fire, with judgment, and with separating those sheep from the goats that we heard about in Matthew 25 on the last Sunday of the church year. We want the world fixed according to our lights and we want it fixed now.

God, by contrast, according to 2 Peter, wants time for everyone to be gathered peacefully in.

God's patience is God's peace.

Patience Leads to Peace

We live in a culture that's become allergic to waiting.

We refresh the tracking number on our package.

We tap our foot at the microwave.

We tap our desk when a webpage takes longer than three seconds to load.

And yet we all say we want peace. But peace—real peace—cannot grow in hurry.

Peace requires spaciousness, slowness, listening.

Peace requires letting go of the illusion that everything must operate on our timetable.

Thanks to Karen Long, I recently listened to an interview with Krista Tippett, one of the world's most gifted interviewers, being interviewed herself, and one of the wise and compassionate things she said about interviewing people is that the best interviewers create a spiritually hospitable space for them and their conversation partners to inhabit together. Providing that

spiritually safe space is essential for allowing people to open up about themselves, their ideas, their projects, their lives, their hopes, their fears, their successes, and their failures. And creating that space takes time. It can't be rushed. As all successful counselors know, you can gently steer a conversation in a particular direction, but you can't poke somebody in the back with your questions or comments and expect them to respond generously. Building trust takes time – and patience.

Impatience fuels anxiety:

“Why isn't this fixed yet?”

“Why aren't they growing up faster?”

“Why can't I move past this?”

“Why is God taking so long?”

That's the downward spiral into frustration, anger, and lashing out. Patience interrupts that spiral.

Patience is the deep breath that makes room for peace.

Patience is the widening of perspective that helps us see beyond the crisis of the moment.

Patience is the trust that God is at work even when we cannot see it.

Again, the words of the priest paleontologist:

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.

We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.

We should like to skip the intermediate stages.

We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new.

And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through some stages of
instability—
and that it may take a very long time.

And patience does something even more profound: it lets
us love the world as it is, not as we wish it were. Patience
is what we get when wishful thinking grows up.

A hurried love demands results.

A patient love makes room for growth.

And where there is room for growth, there is room for
peace.

Three Ways Patience Creates Peace

Let me close this morning with something practical. In this season of high impracticality – wreaths that just hang out, resorting to symbolic candlelight, and singing carols in the shower – let me offer three areas where patience can help us create peace.

1. Patience with ourselves

So many of us live under the pressure of our own expectations.

We think we should already be wiser, healthier, calmer, stronger than we think we are.

We imagine our spiritual life should have leaped ahead by bounds by now.

But God speaks to us as gently as Isaiah spoke to those exiles so long ago:

“Comfort, O comfort... Speak tenderly.”

We do not become whole overnight.

We are not finished growing. Like the plants in my kitchen, we all have sprouts and shoots that are waiting for our notice, attention, and care.

Our healing is not behind schedule. There is no schedule.

Our transformation is not delayed. It's part of the process that includes everything.

If God can be patient with us, then we can be patient with ourselves.

And there is peace in that.

2. Patience with others

Sometimes the hardest work of love is simply giving someone time—time to mature, time to understand, time to come home, time to heal, time to move forward.

We cannot force growth.

We cannot rush forgiveness.

We cannot demand transformation.

Relationships deepen through patient listening, patient truth-telling, patient presence.

Peace takes root when we stop trying to control each

other's pace and instead trust that God is working in every heart, **including the ones that frustrate us most.**

Patience makes room for reconciliation.

And reconciliation is the soil of peace.

One of the greatest gifts of the recent pilgrimage to Ireland and Scotland was the chance for us Americans to learn more about the slow, fitful peace process that is still underway in the north of Ireland, a process we got to witness at a granular level at, among other places, Clonard Monastery and the East Belfast Mission. Here the work of reconciliation continues, with people continuing to “trust in the slow work of God.”

3. Patience with God

We don't always understand God's timing.

We don't always see God's plan.

We don't always feel God's movement.

But Advent insists on this:

God is not late.

God is not absent.

God is not forgetting us.

God is preparing a highway through the wilderness—
slowly, steadily, tenderly.

And even when nothing seems to be happening, God is at
work in ways we cannot yet measure.

Peace comes when we stop treating God's timing as a
mistake and start trusting it as love.

The Pace of Love

We sometimes imagine that if we were in charge, things would move faster—fixes quicker, prayers answered more decisively, justice arriving on our preferred schedule.

But if we had our way, we might get efficiency at the cost of tenderness.

We might get speed at the cost of compassion.

We might get control at the cost of love.

God takes God's time because people need time.

The world needs time.

We need time.

When the early church grew restless, the writer of 2 Peter reminded them that God's seeming delay was actually an act of mercy. God was giving everyone time to be caught up in grace.

And when the people of Israel grew weary, Isaiah proclaimed that God was already on the way, already gathering lambs in God's arms, already leading the mother sheep with gentleness.

God's patience is not a barrier to peace—it is the birthplace of peace.

Living Patiently in a Hurried World

What would it look like for us to reflect God's patient love?

- **To hold space for someone whose journey is slower than ours?**
- **To speak tenderly instead of urgently?**

- **To listen fully instead of preparing our next argument?**
- **To accept that healing—personal, relational, societal—unfolds over time?**
- **To wait with hope rather than anxiety?**

Patience does not mean passivity.

It does not mean shrugging our shoulders at injustice or harm.

It means trusting that the work we do—acts of love, service, advocacy, compassion—can take root and grow in God's time.

It means believing that God is still building highways in our wildernesses, still leveling mountains of inequity, still raising valleys of despair, still smoothing rough places of conflict, still preparing for Christ to enter the world anew.

Our task is not to rush God's work.

Our task is to join it faithfully and patiently.

Patience is the spiritual discipline of believing that the world can change even when the progress is slow.

"Above all, trust in the slow work of God."

Amen.