

There is an old Chinese proverb that goes something like this:  
 There was a poor farmer in central China, one thing he did have was a young stallion. One day the horse jumped the fence and ran away.  
 Everyone in the village said, “Poor man, what bad luck.”  
 “We’ll see,” said the farmer.  
 A few days later the stallion came back home leading some mares with him.  
 Everyone in the village said, “What a lucky man you are!”  
 “We’ll see,” said the farmer.  
 A few days later as this farmer’s son was breaking in the new horses he was bucked off and broke his leg.  
 “What a horrible thing, what bad luck,” the villager’s said.  
 “We’ll see,” said the farmer.  
 A few days after that some army officers came to town to draft any young boy fit for service to go to war. The man’s son was passed over because of his broken leg.  
 “What good fortune!” everyone in the village said.  
 “We’ll see,” said the farmer.  
 It’s a cute little proverb that does a pretty good job of demonstrating the importance of patience – of not looking at your temporary earthly circumstances and judging them to be horrible or good, because you have no idea what tomorrow is going to bring. Something that is bringing you suffering today could bring you joy tomorrow, and something that brings you joy today could bring suffering tomorrow. So, be patient, because you can’t see the end game.  
 Just be patient...  
 If I had a nickel for every time I used, heard, or thought that little bit of advice, well, I’d have a lot of nickels...  
 Just be patient...  
 From the moment we are born we wrestle with this little thing called patience – waiting for the things we think we want or need.  
 Just be patient.  
 Today we get a big “just be patient” from our God, which reminds us that a lack of patience isn’t just a matter of bad manners, it’s a sin. Not being patient is a sin that negatively impacts our relationship with our God in heaven.  
 Why?  
 Well, think about what your impatience consciously or unconsciously communicates....  
 Impatience communicates (whether we realize it or not, whether or not we are consciously thinking these words), “What I want and need is more important than what you want and need. You are not giving me what I want God, and I’m gonna throw a fit because of it.”  
 Impatience is the ultimate toddler stand-off – when he balls up those little fists, stomps his feet, and holds his breath – only it’s not just toddlers who wrestle with impatience.

Patience is something we all wrestle with, especially when it comes to our relationship with God.

In our lesson from James this morning we hear that bit of advice from God, **“Be patient, then brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming... Be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near.”** And then he points us to the prophets and to Job and says, “Look at these guys. Look at these guys for an example of patience.”

How would you react if your life started to play out like Job?

How would you react if your life took a turn for the worse in some big and heartbreaking ways?

I think we all know the correct Christian answer to that... James just told us. Be patient. Trust that God has a plan for this world and that plan includes carrying us through this world to his side in heaven.

But what if, like Job, the suffering just kept on coming? I can barely begin to wrap my mind around what that day must have been like for Job. One after the other, after the other Job receives all the worst news you can get in this world back to back to back. He lost everything he had, everything he had worked for, everything that he relied on to support himself and his family, and then he lost his family too.

And if you know the story of Job, you know that the next day the hits just kept on coming. The devil decided that Job hadn’t suffered enough – he still had his health! And God allowed that to be taken from him so that his entire body was covered with painful sores from top to bottom and the only relief he could find was to get something sharp and scrape them off...

Add on top of that the conversations he has with his friends that make up most of the rest of the book of Job, add nothing but insult to injury. His “friends” show up and sit with him in silence for an entire week. Then they start talking, and what do they have to contribute to Job’s suffering? How do they choose to help? They blame him. They accuse him of doing something to offend God that he would let this happen... some friends...

I can barely begin to wrap my mind around what Job went through, but what I can imagine are the thoughts that very easily could have started running through his mind as he lay in the dirt a broken man... Did God forget about me? Does he even care about me at all? Is he even aware of what I am going through? Doesn’t he care at all about what I want and need? Why would he let all of this suffering come to me?

The reality is it doesn’t take even half of the hardships that Job faced to start many of us asking similar questions. It is just a fact, you don’t have to have a Job-like day to suffer in this world. Suffering, disease, pain, hunger, heartache, and death are not restricted to Bible characters like Job. If you didn’t know it already, it probably won’t surprise any of you to know that now, during the holidays when people are supposed to be happy that our country sees a spike in depression and suicide because holidays tend to bring into focus the uncomfortable truth that much of life is suffering.

As believers in a good and gracious God it is hard to live in this tough world without some impatience with God bubbling to the surface. Believers all around the

world have to wrestle with the reality that on the one hand God tells us that he loves us, promises that he wants what is best for us, but on the other hand our experiences in the world often leave us wondering if where the love and promises have gone.

Today James tells us to learn something from Job, to learn how to be patient in the face of suffering, but I think of all the pain and anguish in this world, in the lives of Christians, in my life and the lives of those I love and patience is often the furthest thing from my mind.

Sometimes, even though I doubt any of you would be bold enough to call out God for failing to do his job, I wonder how often our actions speak louder than our words. We may not be calling God out with our words, but every time we get impatient and allow that impatience to lead to worry and anxiety our actions portray a nagging doubt in our not yet perfect hearts – does God really know what he is doing, and if he does, why in the world would he let this happen to me?

And Job, Job is a man who ultimately showed himself to be made of the same stuff as us.

Today's reading from Job ends by saying, **"In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing."** But this is just day one. And as is often the case with us when it comes to suffering we start of strong, "I can handle this, God will get us through this." But as the days wore on, as Job's friends gave their bits of worldly wisdom, as Job continued to suffer, he eventually did lose patience with his God. He eventually did question his God's choices.

And what was God's answer for Job and us when we wrestle with patience in the face of suffering?

Well, it's twofold.

First of all, a little humility: What right do we have to judge God on how much or how little trouble he lets into our lives? What right do we have to tell God when we have had enough? What right do we have to tell God how he should be doing his job? Is it wise or even beneficial to question our God's love for us? Think about it – doubting the power and love of God to save us from suffering will not stop our suffering. The only thing it will do is leave us without hope as we continue to suffer in this world.

God's response to Job and to us when we wrestle to remain patient with him is a humbling one. It's a demand to remember who we are and who he is: who are you to question me? You are not God. You were not there when I spoke and created this world? You can't possibly fathom all the complexity to my plan for you and this world. You don't have the right to be impatient with me. Like that farmer in the Chinese proverb, we need to remember that we are not God. We cannot possibly label the things that happen to us as ultimately good or bad from our very limited perspective.

That was God's response to Job. It is a humbling response that puts us in our place, but it isn't God's only response to sinners like us wrestling with patience in this world so full of struggles and sin.

God's second response: Jesus.

Do you want to know the secret to remaining patient with God when suffering rears its ugly head in your life? Humility that remembers our limitations at judging what is good and isn't good is a start, but the ultimate answer is Jesus.

In the Gospel for today, John the Baptist sat rotting in prison because he fearlessly preached that straight-talking message from God that we talked about last week: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. John sat in that prison suffering all the discomfort and indignities that prison has to offer. John would sit in that prison until his head was cut off for preaching that straight-talking message from God and for God.

He sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one? Is this the real deal? Am I suffering for nothing? Have I put my eggs in the wrong basket?"

How does Jesus respond? **"Go tell John what you see and hear. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor."**

In other words: I *am* the Messiah.

You see, God's answer to sin and suffering was given the moment sin and suffering entered this world. It was given right there in the Garden of Eden – a promise that a Savior would come to undo what caused all this sin and suffering. Over the next thousands of years God refined that promise. He told us very specific things that the Savior of the world would do and say when he came – so that when he came we wouldn't miss him; so that we would be able to identify him as the one in whom we should trust.

Among those very specific promises was a rolling back of the consequences of sin, the suffering we all endure. When that Savior came blind people would see, lame people would walk, deaf people would hear, dead people would be raised, and the good news would be preached.

Now, when it comes to your life and mine and when our suffering will be rolled back, God hasn't told us exactly when that will happen. Even though we would love to know when that will happen, answers can sometimes be a substitute for faith, and faith is what God asks of us, faith and patience.

One thing that God has made perfectly clear to us (the reason the church has celebrated the season of Advent for hundreds of years), God already came once as a baby in Bethlehem, as a Savior on a cross. God already accomplished on that cross the hard work it will take to roll back the consequences of sin in your life one – a day of God's choosing, not yours. God already came once, and he left us his Word, full of proof that he comes to save those who are hurt, to heal those who are sick, to bind up those with broken hearts – people like Job, who made it through this loss, eventually got his prosperity back and a new family, but most importantly died with faith in a God who saves and lives now at his right hand; people like the prophet John the Baptist, who died trusting in Jesus and now enjoy life free from suffering.

Let's learn from them. Let's learn from a God who came once. Let's learn from a God who comes to us on a regular basis through his faith-working word. Let's be patient and wait for God's promise to come true for you and me. Amen.