

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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The Patience of God

Isaiah 64:1-12

Entering today's text is like walking in on a really intense prayer rally. God's people are pleading with him to come to them with mercy and redemption. They're racked with guilt, overwhelmed with sorrow, and sapped of all spiritual vitality. Their sins have created a huge chasm between themselves and the God who called them, created them, and has redeemed them in the past. But it's going to take more than just God's past mercies to straighten out the people's present mess. What they need is a new and fresh outpouring of God's goodness and love, now. And so they pray.

They pray that the Lord will tear open the heavens and descend into their midst. They plead with him to show up in saving power, and to do so in dramatic fashion. "O Lord, remember that awesome display when you came down at Mount Sinai and met with Moses. Remember how you revealed yourself and told us your name. Remember the thick cloud, the fire and smoke, the blast of the trumpet. Do that again, or at least something a lot like that. And do it now!"

God's people are praying for a pyrotechnic visit from above. They yearn for a holy encounter that will make it unmistakably clear that the Lord is with them. It reminds me of some remarks by novelist Annie Dillard, who says that when we church people worship, we're like children who think we're playing around with a chemistry set but are actually mixing up a bunch of TNT. Dillard says, "It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to worship; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."¹

Earlier in our service, we lit the first candle on our Advent wreath. So yes, we have brought some fire into today's worship gathering. But it seems pretty dim and tame compared to the kind of heavenly blaze that the Israelites were praying for. "As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!" (v. 2). Nations quaking. Mountains trembling. God's people are praying that he will show up in a way that generates a seismic reaction.

But for all the urgency of their prayers, God's people also know from their own experience that he "acts on behalf of those who wait for him" (v. 4). Their own history with God tells his people that he isn't the kind of deity who shows up whenever they snap their fingers. The Lord is no genie who appears whenever his people rub the bottle and wish for better circumstances and improved conditions. True, in view of their sorrow, guilt, helplessness, and their sense of God's absence, it's understandable that in today's Scripture passage, the Israelites would invoke his presence and ask for a quick turnaround on their prayer. But looking back on their journey with Lord, it's clear that faith in God's faithfulness is inseparable from waiting on the Lord to act, to redeem, to save. In other words, impatient prayers don't guarantee an immediate response from this very patient God.

A couple of years ago, freelance writer Chelsea Wald published an article titled, "Why Your Brain Hates Slowpokes." She noted various forms of "slowness rage," such as when you're walking with someone who goes at a more casual pace than you, and you get irritated because you're worried that they're going to make you late. Wald says,

Slowness rage is not confined to the sidewalk, of course. Slow drivers, slow Internet, slow grocery lines—they all drive us crazy. . . . So I'll get to the point. Slow things drive us crazy because the fast pace of society has warped our sense of timing. Things that our great-great-grandparents would have found miraculously efficient now drive us around the bend. Patience is a virtue that's been vanquished in the Twitter age.²

We're so accustomed to getting what we want with a voice command, the touch of a button, or the tap of a screen. We don't deal well with slowness, or what appears to be slowness. That includes our perception of God and the pace of his activity in our lives and in the world.

Our confusion, disappointment, and often frustration with God's timing is nothing new. The Scripture for reflection in today's bulletin reminds us humans of our distorted perception of God's timetable: "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:8-9). So instead of succumbing to slowness rage toward heaven, we need to remember that what looks to us like God's slowness is actually a matter of God's patience and his desire for people to turn to him for salvation. What from our vantage point looks like bad news about God's inaction, is actually good news about the opportunity we have to take action by repenting and believing.

This is one of the primary reasons we engage in the work of Christian missions. The missions moment video that you saw earlier, and the others we'll watch in upcoming Sundays, are testimonies to the patience and perseverance of God in spreading the news of his saving sovereignty to the whole world. When we give, and when we pray, and when we go, we're participating in the patience of God, knowing that one day his longsuffering will come to an end and we'll all be called to account for how we've responded to the good news of Jesus Christ.

One of the ways the patience of God is manifested in the world is through our own patience with one another. Our relationships and interactions with other people, both within the church and beyond the church, are the contexts and places where we practice and exhibit the compassion and mercy and longsuffering of God. According to a traditional Hebrew story,

Abraham was sitting outside his tent one evening when he saw an old man, weary from age and journey, coming toward him. Abraham rushed out, greeted him, and then invited him into his tent. There he washed the old man's feet and gave him food and drink.

The old man immediately began eating without saying any prayer or blessing. So Abraham asked him, "Don't you worship God?"

The old traveler replied, "I worship fire only and reverence no other god."

When he heard this, Abraham became incensed, grabbed the old man by the shoulder, and threw him out of his tent into the cold night air.

When the old man had departed, God called to his friend Abraham and asked where the stranger was. Abraham replied, "I forced him out because he did not worship you."

God answered, "I have suffered him these eighty years although he dishonors me. Could you not endure him one night?"³

Our own impatience is one of the ways we sin against the patient ways of God. And yet, it's our recollection of his patience that enables us to seek forgiveness and a renewal of his presence. So it is for God's people in our text. After acknowledging that their disobedience has created a huge chasm between themselves and God, and that their spiritual vitality is depleted, a ray of redemption breaks through. "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand" (v. 8).

Remember that at the beginning of their prayer, God's people were pleading impatiently. They were urging God to invade like a divine warrior, using shock and awe to set things right and prove that he is with them. But at this point in the prayer rally, the tone, and the imagery, have shifted some. God isn't just a king and a judge. Though he is certainly both of these things, and many more, he is most of all Father—loving, forgiving, guiding, and molding his children. God the Father is the source of their life and their existence as his people. And because God is the one who originally made them, they still belong to him. He's still making them, still working upon them. That means his saving action isn't always about an immediate and dramatic fix. Instead, his deliverance is often a slow and steady shaping, like a potter taking a lump of clay and patiently turning it into a thing of beauty.

Theologian Hermann Cremer once noted, "The history of the world moves forward under the patience of God."⁴ As Christians, we believe that the decisive moment in God's history with the world came at the cross. That's where we see God's patience most fully revealed. On the surface, the crucifixion of Jesus looks like a horrible tragedy. But in reality it was God's perfect timing, reconciling us to himself. Instead of giving us the condemnation we deserve, God gives us forgiveness and new life. Christ's death for our sins is the world-changing and life-changing sign of God's longsuffering love. So when we look at the sorry state of the world, and the brokenness of our own lives, the only place we can go to find hope and healing is the cross.

That's why the Lord's Table is prepared for us again today. As we begin our journey toward the celebration of our Savior's birth, the bread and cup remind us of how God, in an incredibly humble and unspectacular way, tore open the heavens and came down to redeem humankind. His descent took him all the way to the cross. That's where we see the decisive revelation of his patient, longsuffering love and his will to remake us and remold us into his image. And so we pray: "Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him."

¹ Dillard is quoted in Thomas G. Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes: Sermons for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany* (Lima: Ohio: CSS, 1987) 34.

² Chelsea Wald, "Why Your Brain Hates Slowpokes." *Nautilus* magazine website. March 5, 2015. Accessed November 29, 2017 < http://nautil.us/issue/22/slow/why-your-brain-hates-slowpokes?utm_source=nextdraft&utm_medium=email#inbox/_blank>.

³ From *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal*, ed. Craig Brian Larson (Grand rapids: Baker, 1993) 172.

⁴ Quoted in Derek Rishmawy, "When God's Mercy Sounds Like Bad News." Christianity Today website. February 17, 2017. Accessed November 30, 2017 < <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/march/when-gods-mercy-sounds-like-bad-news.html>>.