

**Sunday, December 10, 2023**  
**Jeremiah 29:5-14; Mark 1:1-8**  
**“A Little Patience”**  
**The rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching**

Every year around this time, my parents would begin baking the breads. The “Christmas Tree Breads”. Just about everyone in our town knew of these breads. One year my father was featured in the local newspaper holding the beautiful bread, but he never gave out the recipe, except to family. My sister and I used to sit by the chopping block watching my father roll out the dough, my mother carefully taking the rolled pieces and shaping them into branches, braiding three pieces down the middle for the trunk; and our job – to place red or green candied cherries on each stem. It really did look like a Christmas tree.

But by far, my favorite part was on Christmas Eve, when my parents would bring about a dozen breads they had made to church (always leaving one or two at home for our Christmas morning) and decide who to give them to that year. Usually, after giving them to their closest friends, they would give them to - maybe someone who had a hard year, someone who was new, someone whom you could tell needed something special that Christmas. I loved watching their faces light up or their question – what is it?

The part I didn’t remember until a couple years ago, when I decided I would make a Christmas Tree bread, was how very long it took to make one. After making the dough, you had to knead it *forever*, and then wait *forever* for the dough to rise, and then knead it again and make the trees and then wait *forever* for it to rise again before baking. I’m just not so sure I have the patience to bake bread. But I’m trying, because traditions, family rituals, preparation, and patience are all part of this season and it all relates to being at peace. Being at peace, takes patience. Let’s think about patience for a moment.

What is it that really tries your patience? How about these . . .

Listening to a crying infant learning to fall asleep for 30 minutes or holding a colicky baby crying for 3 hours. Patience. OR

Sitting in traffic with some unexpected construction which is going to put your perfectly timed day and your arrival to Bible Study in jeopardy! Patience. OR

Putting 1,000 little white lights perfectly on the trees outside in freezing cold temperatures. Patience OR

Putting together the 1,000-piece K’nex Roller Coaster or your son’s bicycle on Christmas Eve at midnight. Patience. OR

Simply waiting; waiting in line – at the DMV, grocery store, you name your favorite place, waiting in the line that is by far the slowest one of them all. Patience.

But what about patience when we are in the wilderness places in our lives – patience waiting for the medical test results, waiting for pain to subside, waiting for grief to lessen - waiting for good news. That kind of patience. It has been said, Patience is the art of hoping. That is the kind of patience the people of Israel had. Patience in hoping for a Messiah to come, to return home, for peace and freedom and love to come.

Hundreds of years ago, the prophet Jeremiah spoke to a people who had been waiting and waiting, trying to be patient. They had been exiled, taxed, dishonored, moved, discriminated against, and much more. They thought their exile would last about one generation, but

another generation was now adults and they were losing all hope. So the prophet provides them with – first reality and then hope – the reality was their exile, was going to be more like 70 more years. And so, he also gives them something to do while waiting and that is “live your lives, make this your home, own land, plant gardens, arrange marriages”. The prophet Jeremiah reminds them and us that God is always at work in creating something new, even when our plans completely fall apart. Even when our peace is gone and our patience is nowhere to be found. Then the prophet announced the hope filled word from God, “I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place, says the Lord, for surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope”.

Hundreds of years later, the Gospel of Mark brings this good news of hope and peace and joy, to those who too had been waiting and waiting for a Messiah, trying to be patient. In the Gospel of Mark there are no lengthy birth genealogies, no Jesus being born in a stable, no announcements from angels; Mark gets right to the good news – right into the heart of Jesus’ ministry. Literally the narrator is saying “now hear this!” What an exciting way to begin – “guess what, I’ve got great news, remember when the prophet Isaiah said, ‘see, I am sending my messenger ahead of you who will prepare the way’, well, he’s here and his name is John and he will prepare you because, guess what, Jesus is the Messiah is coming, soon. And he’s not just a quick fix to a creation-gone-wrong, he’s the one, the Christ, who has been central to God’s plan all along. And he’s coming.”

“So”, he goes on, “go to the wilderness and look for this man named John – he looks a little funny, quite hairy, with a camel’s hair coat and a leather belt around his waist, and he will probably be seen crunching on locusts with wild honey on them, but he’s the one you want to see to be baptized”.

And the people went in flocks to the wilderness, multitudes. Wait a minute – the people just went? Out of their comfortable homes in the city and into the cold dangerous wilderness to see this strange hairy man? Would you have gone? But what we must remember is that the people of Israel were quite familiar with the wilderness and knew all about its meaning and significance. John, one of the few true Nazarenes who lived in the wilderness studying and preparing; appears to the people just like the prophet Elijah, hairy and all, whom they expected to come.

It had been 300 years since a prophet was active in Israel. They had probably heard all the stories about John’s birth, Jesus’ birth, and went to the wilderness with great anticipation. For the wilderness is where the people of Israel experienced all of their history, it is where they experienced God and learned of the Messiah to come in the first place. “It is in the wilderness that God tests the people, and it is in the wilderness that they rebel. The wilderness was both a route to the Promised Land and a place of exile for those who disappointed God.” (1) That’s why the people went.

Mark’s words of preparation must become ours – repent, straighten the roads, smooth the valleys, be baptized, and get ready for celebration. But let me make one thing clear, the Greek word for repentance does not mean being immersed in guilt for our sinful behaviors, but rather it means a change of mind or a change in direction, it means establishing a new way of thinking. We too need a new way of thinking and preparing. Because right now, God is moving us into a new place of being – of being family, of being church, of being a community.

And John proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me, so be prepared.' This is a point all preachers and worship leaders need to always keep in mind – our sole purpose is to point to one far greater than ourselves. So great is the one to follow, John tells the people, that he is not even worthy enough to untie his sandals, a task of the lowliest gentile slave to their master – that's how great he is. John said, I clean but Jesus purifies. So let's go.

While Christmas is a time of celebration, Advent is a time of anticipation or preparation. And preparing or waiting is perhaps the most important part of Christmas. All of us spend a lot of time preparing our homes and our families, but how many of us prepare our hearts for spiritual renewal? Our waiting, our preparation, should echo the hopes and anxieties of our ancestors in faith, who awaited hundreds of years the coming of the Messiah. We need to learn how to wait. How? It begins with Good News! – and a call from a strange man – repent, change your ways, get washed, and prepare your heart. John didn't say – prepare for Christmas – prepare for relatives and friends to come by cooking up a storm – prepare your children by buying every present they have on their list – prepare your home by decorating for days and days – he said – prepare the way for the Lord, open your heart for the spirit to enter again.

My friends, this road we are on may seem long and the hill we climb may seem steep at times, and in this season of darkness, we need to walk through it into the light and make this a season of hope, so that our lives may be filled with love, our hearts with peace, and our souls with the strength of God. And then and only then may the light of God which permeates our lives, shine from our hearts to others. So before I close, let me suggest to you three ways to open our hearts, to prepare our souls, and to walk through the darkness, and witness to the light and peace of this Advent Season.

First, is what I have been talking about – practice patience, really practice patience. Let me ask you this: Has your time of preparation, of waiting, whatever you are waiting for right now, whatever tries your patience right now, has it become a time of dread, frustration, anxiety, loneliness, depression? Or can you be open to letting John's words change you for the better. While this can be a season of strong emotion and unrealistic expectations, it can also to be a season of good news. The church, all of you, can be the voice in the wilderness to the outside world – the voice of hope and peace.

This season, as we light the Advent Candles, we need to light a candle and sit patiently and wait. We need to prepare him room. Create space for peace to enter our hearts. Look up what I showed the bible Study this week, and watch JJ Heller's song and YouTube video, My Missing Peace.

Second, we need to be quiet! Seriously, we need to shut up and listen for a change. Every year we are all guilty of it, we easily get caught up in the constant noise, the fast pace, Black Friday, Small Business Saturday, Cyber Monday! And while singing as loud as we can with our favorite Christmas Carols – you know Nate King Cole or Mariah Carey – hope you don't ever see me driving down the road this month – I love to sing in the car! And how we love watching our favorite Christmas movies – like Love Actually or It's a Wonderful Life – classics, I cry every time! We also need to spend a little time in silence. Some of us purposely avoid the quiet of this season, but going to a place of quietness on purpose, is creating a place of peace and hope.

This season, as we light the Advent Candles, we need to light a candle and be alone for awhile, and just sit and listen. For solitude is the one place where we can gain freedom from all

of the news that is sometimes just overwhelming. And it is in those moments, that we learn how to pray to the Prince of Peace, it is there that we may actually understand God's vision of hope for us, God's light to guide our way.

Third, we need to create lasting memories. While the stuff of Christmas, the presents, the baking, the shopping, it's fun; but it's the traditions, the memories, the sharing, that we really cherish. Just try breaking one little tradition in your home, where the tree will go, who puts the star on top and watch how people react! The symbols, the memories are what holds families together. Think of the smells and tastes of tradition and try not making that special cookie or favorite potatoes and watch how your children react!

This season, as we light the Advent candles, we need to light a candle of our own and think about those who don't have a family to share memories with, the lonely, the grieving, maybe someone living or sitting right next to you. And start a new tradition, maybe a neighborhood gathering, a call to a friend you haven't heard from in years, invite someone new over for tea. As our author Kara Eidson states, "Because in God's kin-dom, we aren't just planning for those who are already in the house. We are planning for those who have not yet come to the Table, for those who do not even know that they are longing to receive the meal". (2) The love, the peace.

Will I make a Christmas Tree Bread this season? Probably – because it will teach me to stop and pause and wait *forever* for something wonderful. Will I make a dozen of them and pass them out on Christmas Eve – no way – I don't have that much patience! During this season of rapid preparation, when things try your patience, remember how much patience God has with us, waiting for us to turn and be renewed, waiting with us and transforming us. Remember all those in the wilderness places who are waiting for a word of hope. And if you are one of those who is in the wilderness, be comforted, for God will feed his flock like a shepherd, there is good news coming for us all.

So, during this Advent season, try to learn a little patience, a little silence, a new memory because if you don't, you will never hear the bells ring, you will never hear the angels sing, you will never feel the Christ child's love, you will never know peace in your heart, and you will never have prepared at all. In the name of the prince of peace, who comes to us anew each day, AMEN.

(1) Donovan, The Rev. Richard. "SermonWriter". Second Sunday of Advent.

(2) Eidson, The Rev. Kara. "Stay Awhile: Advent Lessons in Divine Hospitality", p. 33.