

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Welcome to the holy season of Advent- a season that is all about waiting – waiting for the fulfillment of all God’s promises and preparing our hearts for the coming of Christ at Christmastime. As people of God we are called to have patience and hope as we wait on God, trusting God’s promises and plans for us despite all appearances. And for me to preach about patient waiting makes me think God has a sense of humor because I am absolutely terrible at waiting. I’m really bad at waiting and I’m really good at being impatient. I always have been.

Sometime ago I started to pray for patience, thinking this might help. What I discovered was that God started providing me with many, many more opportunities than usual to exercise patience by waiting more. It became a running joke between God and I. I’d say, “Okay God, the slowest driver in the city is always going to pull in front of me when I’m in a hurry, how do you manage that?” or “Okay God, I’m looking for the shortest line at Target and surely I will choose the slowest line, no matter what I do, right?” And I always do. I will get into the visibly shortest line but something will inevitably go awry. The cash register will break, a person’s credit card won’t work right, or something even worse. Like what occurred to me a few weeks ago in what I now call “My worst Target line incident ever.” Mind you, I had 2 grumpy and very whiny children in my cart with me when this happened to me: Every line was 5 or 6 people deep including ours. So after a long wait the customer immediately ahead of me began to check out. She asked for price checks on every single item in her very full cart, then pondered each item carefully and decided not to buy most of them. She then ran through the checkout process only to then realize she’d left her wallet in her car- we waited as she ran out to the parking lot to get it, and finally paid nearly 20 minutes since her transaction had begun. I was sweating bullets trying to keep myself and my children calm while we waited for who knows how long. When it was finally my turn I anticipated the cashier would apologize for the wait as they usually do – but instead she looked at me blankly and said, “Do you want to apply for a Target card today?” In my mind I responded sarcastically, “Oh yes, I’d love

to prolong my time here in line at Target today and make everyone behind me wait -thank you so much for asking.” So it was all I could do to simply say with gritted teeth, “NO THANK YOU.” As I walked out of the store I told God, “Okay, that’s it, I’m not praying for patience anymore...I can’t handle this much practice.

So yes- waiting. Waiting can be hard. And it seems I’m not alone in that struggle-- we’re not particularly good at waiting here in America. For instance, I read a column this week about the ways in which the “quick fix mentality” is compromising Americans’ health. The article reads, “Can’t sleep? Pop a pill. Need to lose weight? There’s a pill for that. Can’t focus? Here’s another pill.” You get the idea. But, she writes, this mentality is having very detrimental effects on our overall health in the US. And we are all about getting things instantly these days – we Instagram, instant message, tweet, have same day delivery, instant coffee, instant downloads, you name it. I was recently trying to explain to my 13-year-old that when I was her age and liked a song and I wanted to hear it, I had to wait for it to play on the radio or go to a store and purchase a cassette tape to play on stereo. She just looked at me incredulously with confusion.

But our quick fixes and habits of instant-everything can overlap into more serious and even more impactful issues. When we don’t exercise the patience it requires to really talk to each other- face to face and person to person and actually listen patiently to one another and those we disagree with we start to experience a savage breakdown in communication across our differences, as individuals and as a nation and certainly across political divides. This is one of the reasons I felt a Civil Discourse series and the recent “Living Room Conversation” we had here at St. James was so necessary. Thank you so much to the 40 to 50 people who came to some of the sessions. We desperately need to engage one another with a sense of hopeful expectation by listening and asking questions and taking time to more fully understand the issues, far beyond the daily soundbites. And there is no such thing as a quick fix when it comes to the great social ills we’re facing today. It will take time and patient effort by all of

us to cooperate with each other to develop better, wiser, more humane, reasonable and sustainable solutions to these big problems whether we're talking about non-stop war, the global refugee crisis, public safety in America, climate change, or finding a reasonable way forward in what is happening just a few miles away at our borders with the thousands of asylum seekers there. It can seem overwhelming.

But Advent invites us not to lose hope – even when things look dire or seem to be taking a long time, even too long. Our reading today from the prophet Jeremiah reminds us of the call of Advent saying, “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.” Jeremiah was ministering at the time Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC. There was incredible political and religious upheaval then. And yet, this message of hope – to wait patiently on God and God's promises held fast – and it holds today as well.

Advent invites us to embrace patient waiting on God's promises. A friend of mine this week referred to it as an invitation to stand in line at the “spiritual DMV.” When you're at the DMV (or sometimes at Target), it seems like it takes forever, most people there are incredibly impatient and often frustrated in long lines, but we all get in those lines and wait because we have faith that somehow, at the end of all that waiting, we'll get what we came there for. We can either be sour while we wait for Christmas or try to rush our way there, grabbing clearance items out of other shoppers hands, or we can take the counter-cultural approach of Advent, embracing and finding purpose, meaning, and even fulfillment in the wait itself with faith as our guide. What if we viewed patient waiting, no matter what it is we must wait for at this moment in our lives – waiting as a chance to exercise our faith more deeply? To practice our faith by waiting, and working and trusting that God's promises for us will be fulfilled in God's way and in God's time...that

the promised Christ child, the branch of David, will get here at exactly the right time, maybe even when we least expect it. If we can embrace Advent, this spiritual DMV headed towards Christmas with an attitude of such hopeful expectation – then I believe the gifts and promises of God, fulfilled that dark night in Bethlehem in a stable under a shining star, can be ours too. Wait on God and don't lose hope, embrace patient waiting as a spiritual practice as you engage others in those sometimes very long lines of life.

Amen.