

March 7, 2010 Lent 3C Communion
Isaiah 55:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

We are almost half-way through the season of Lent,
the time of repentance, prayer, reflection
and reconsideration of how we are living our lives before God.
If any of you have taken on some spiritual practice
or given something up,
it is right about now when you are seriously reconsidering your
decision.

By this point, two and a half weeks in,
you have become aware enough of the drives to do or not do
the thing you have taken on for this 7 week period of time.

Now you are confronted with the forces of habit and
justification which will allow you to simply return to
the way you were before.

Or you can make the effort of will to just stay with
the discomfort
and wait it out to something more meaningful.

That is why today we will be talking about the temptation to
impatience,

the temptation to make the future I want
and make it happen right now.

It is really hard to wait for things.

I can't stand it, quite frankly.

There are a lot of things I want now and they still aren't
happening.

Simple things, like getting ready in the morning,
fill me with impatience, which leads to frustration.

The number of steps between what I have to do in the morning and
getting to where I want to be shortens my fuse.

And once we move those simple worldly things into the spiritual
realm, I can get quite frustrated.

All temptations share similarities and the one that impatience
brings to the surface

is how clearly my impatience is only about one thing -
me and my needs.

"Patience is a virtue" they say,

but often it seems in the short term impatience and impulsive
behavior gets things done quickly.

The outcome of thinking that way can go on for a long time
before the effects are visible.

Our poor tree out in front of the church serves as an example.

As I drove up to the tree the morning after the big storm,
it became very clear why the tree went down in high winds.
The root structure was very shallow, which I guess is
common around here.

For something to last a long time,
for something to withstand high winds and heavy
storms,

it needs to be firmly rooted into the soil.

Then, on Tuesday, I was at a monthly pastors meeting up in
Appleton.

Part of my process for preparing for a sermon is to make sure I
have read the texts for the coming week by Monday morning or
evening at the latest. I try to have the ideas and images
percolating for several days.

The problem with doing a sermon series is, when I decided to do it,
I had a clearer idea of what I meant by the temptation to
impatience than I did last week when I was driving to the pastors
meeting.

So at the pastors meeting, one of the pastors there started
talking about the difficulties of ministry and how long things take.
I began to listen closely.

Then he began to talk about one of his hobbies,
which is growing trees.

The process to make sure your tree grows strong, deep roots is far longer and more involved than I could have imagined.
He talked of planting the saplings,
then once they sprout, you transplant them again.
You keep doing this over the course of several years.
It takes a lot of time and a lot of water.
And you have to know your trees well.

What I heard in it, however,
is that deep roots do not come naturally.
The tree has to be stressed
and put through trials
and be made to struggle
in order to train it to reach down deep for its support.

Now, our tree in front of the church,
the large spruce,
had a good run with its shallow root system
and it had probably gotten lucky in terms of location
and weather to survive as long as it did.

But when the really strong winds
and the really heavy rains hit,
it couldn't stand.

Growing roots,
becoming stable in the soil you have been planted,
withstanding heavy weather takes patience
and it takes training
and time.

The temptation to impatience jumps the gun.
It sees some vague glimmer of a promised future
and wants to make the future be here now.

I am reminded of Veruca Salt, who is the bossy girl in Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory.
"But Daddy, I want it now!"

Veruca can't stand waiting.
She can't stand the need to wait.
Her father, of course, gives in to her every whim
because there has never been
a more beautiful,
talented,
wonderful girl
than his little Veruca.

Veruca, in her impetuosity,
demands her father buy her one of Wonka's Golden Egg Laying geese.

When Willy Wonka refuses to sell,
Veruca throws a tantrum
and eventually gets dumped into the "bad egg" chute.

The song Veruca sings as she is sent down the chute is
I Want It Now.

Jesus doesn't tolerate impatience very well.
He is impatient about impatience, if you will.
That is because Jesus has something to teach us about the opposite of impatience, which is perseverance.

When the people tell Jesus about the Galileans who were slaughtered by Pilate in the temple, they want Jesus to confirm their attitudes about how God works.

They want to hear the temple worshipers died because of their sin.

Isn't that what God does?
Kill sinners and bless the saved?

Jesus says,

"No. Do you really think those people were more of a sinner than anyone else?"

Do you think God sends disasters to punish people?"

Actually, they did think that.
Some of us today think like that.
Wouldn't it be easier if bad things happened to bad people?
Wouldn't it be helpful to everyone if God were responsible for the accidents and horrors that occur around the world?

Jesus won't say this.

He refuses to give into this simplification of the ways of God because Jesus knows very well

"God's ways are higher than our ways and God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts" (Is 55:9).

If only the world looked the way we wanted it to look.

If only God would cooperate with MY vision.

If only the future we think God wants for us would happen now.

Then, then, everything would be just the way I want it.

Then Jesus tells the people,

"...but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Great tragedy does something to us which holds the seeds of transformation within it.

It forces us to look at our own mortality,
to face our own death.

Jesus tells the people,

"This is not a bad thing, because in facing your death you will see where you are turned away from God.

If you don't face up to where you are out of relationship with God, it will be for you just as it was for those who died in these tragic accidents."

In other words, if we do not realign ourselves to our Lord and our God, our souls will perceive our deaths as meaningless destruction.

God is not arbitrary and God is not capricious.

Promises made by God are promises fulfilled by God.

Natural laws and processes put in place are meant to stay in place. God is bound by the constraints of God's own promises and laws. This means God cannot promise one thing one moment and then decide God doesn't want to fulfill that promise the next.

The covenant with us is everlasting.

We find our meaning in the eternity and immovability of God.

For us, though, living into God's promises also means living into the promise of waiting.

We live, as TS Eliot says,

in "*the time of tension between dying and birth*".

Can we stand it?

Standing in that tension?

It is right in that tension, though,

if we can wait

and be patient

and persevere,

the mystery of God arises.

All around us, our life might be like our fig tree in Jesus' parable:

nothing productive growing in what we do,

nothing happening in our relationships,

as if everything around us is stagnating.

Often this is the time when people cut their losses,

take the ax to the root of the tree.

And it may indeed turn out to be the best thing to do later on.

The temptation to act on our impatience may irrevocably alter the future God has in store for us though.

Those fallow, barren times are also the time when the gardener, Jesus, stands beside us and says,

"You know, just give it a little time.

Let's leave things alone for a year or so.

Let me fertilize the soil around it

and dig around so the roots have some room to reach more nutrients in the soil.

*Come back then
and let's talk about what is happening then."*

Waiting is hard work.

Patience and perseverance is not a habit we can cultivate.

Rather it is a discipline we are asked to participate in as often as we are confronted with the need to act on our own desires and impulses.

God's promise,
that great and free banquet we participate in with a life in Christ,
is a promise born of waiting,
a promise born of persevering through
trials and storms and troubles.

Can you feel your roots grow deeper when you take the time to wait through those things with the gardener of our lives?

The Good News of Christ is often

"the beginning of problems we would gladly have avoided" (William Willimon, *"The Cup of Death"*, Christian Century, March 31, 1982).

Because of what we proclaim and accept as the foundation of reality- God and Jesus Christ- we see more clearly just how difficult it is to carve out a space for God in this "vale of Soulmaking", as John Keats calls this world.

Temptation surrounds us.

The meaningless and chaos of disasters and violence surround us.

Death confronts us in every moment.

Where is that so-promised perfect world without tears,

without pain,
without heartbreak?

It is easier to just toss out the whole thing than tolerate this interminable waiting we do as worshipers of a God who saves, loves and cares for us.

The temptation to impatience seeks to bend God's future into our present time.

The temptation to impatience would rather keep our roots shallow for the sake of temporary heights of greatness and material gain

instead of the patience to be put through trials which deepen our roots.

We would rather not wait to be pulled more solidly into the soil of faith and trust in God.

We would rather not persevere one more trial which would ultimately strengthen us in the face of destruction,

death

and evil.

Barbara Brown Taylor says, *"What we crave, above all, is control over the chaos of our lives"* (Barbara Brown Taylor, *"Life-Giving Fear"*, Christian Century, March 4, 1998).

Once we accept a life of waiting with God, however, once we are pulled out of the waters into a new life of patience in Christ, once we seek to persevere through trials to find the presence of the Holy Spirit, we will see God's incredible loving patience with us.

It is really a moving thing, to know God is giving us one more chance to live into the promises of God.

Like a gardener,
the Lord stands by us and tends the soil of our faith.

Storms may come,
but our roots are deepened by the love God has shown us through Christ.

Paul tells us God will not tempt us beyond our endurance.

The great challenge with impatience is enduring our desire to see the future in our way.

Can we wait?

Jesus has prepared a great meal for us.

The gift is free.

"Come, buy and eat!

Without money and without price".

The promise of the Lord's Supper

is the promise of waiting,

of patience,

of God's everlasting covenant.

Our ability to wait,

to resist the temptation to impatience,

is born out in the gift of bread and wine which proclaims Christ's death and Resurrection.

"Seek the Lord, people of God, while the Lord may be found".

"As often as we eat this bread and drink this wine,

We proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again."

This is how TS Eliot puts it at the end of his poem

"Ash Wednesday":

This is the time of tension between dying and birth

The place of solitude where three dreams cross

Between blue rocks

But when the voices shaken from the yew-tree drift away

Let the other yew be shaken and reply.

Blessèd sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the garden,

Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood

Teach us to care and not to care

Teach us to sit still

Even among these rocks,

Our peace in His will

And even among these rocks

Sister, mother

And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,

Suffer me not to be separated

And let my cry come unto Thee.

AMEN.