

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Sunday, 9 December 2018

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

“Please, Be Patient. Someone Will Be With You Shortly”

Hebrew Scripture: Malachi 3:1-5

Christian Scripture: Luke 1:68-79



Our sermon series, which began last week, is about ‘waiting’. Hence, it is entitled ‘The Waiting Room’. And what is the premier virtue one can acquire in the ‘The Waiting Room’? ... That’s right! You guessed it. Patience. So, a few quips about patience are in order to get us going this morning.



You must first have a lot of patience to learn to have patience.¹

I need to develop some patience – immediately.²

I am extraordinarily patient, provided I get my own way in the end.³

A healthy male adult bore consumes each year one and a half times his own weight in other people's patience.⁴

Patience is something you admire in the driver behind you and scorn in the one ahead.⁵

Yes, we are in 'The Waiting Room'. And, in our scripture readings this morning we see a great deal of patience displayed. Let us start from the back and move forward.



This morning we hear from the prophet Malachi whose preaching begins our wait for John the Baptist.

¹ Stanislaw Lec, (1909 - 1966) Polish poet, writer & aphorist

² Demetri Martin, (1973-) American comedian

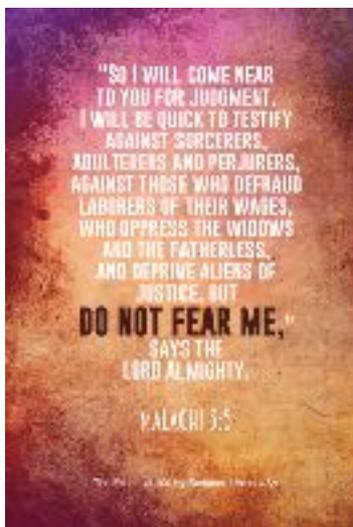
³ Margaret Thatcher, (1925-2013), British prime minister and politician

⁴ John Updike, (1932 - 2009) author, poet & critic

⁵ Mac Mcleary



Next, we are also waiting for John the Baptist through his father, the priest Zachariah, whose song we listened to this morning in our scripture reading from Luke. Also, of course, we are waiting for the Jesus' birth that we celebrate on Christmas day. Yet, we are also waiting that which John the Baptist announced: the advent of Jesus' ministry and the one who inaugurated the realm of God. Remember, last week we were told that we are also waiting for our own continued participation in the fostering of the realm of God.



And we are waiting (here we are coming full circle) for 'the Day of Judgment', a somewhat ominous phrase, that means the same as 'the

fulfilment of the realm of God' and the establishment of perfect justice - God's rule on Earth. Friends, that is a lot of waiting!

Yet, in between all this waiting was *another* waiting. I don't believe the story of Zachariah foretelling the calling of his son, John the Baptist, can be told without also hearing how John the Baptist and his disciples lost patience with his cousin and once upon a time disciple, Jesus. John understandably felt Jesus' mission was taking too long - it was too slow. Let me share about that.



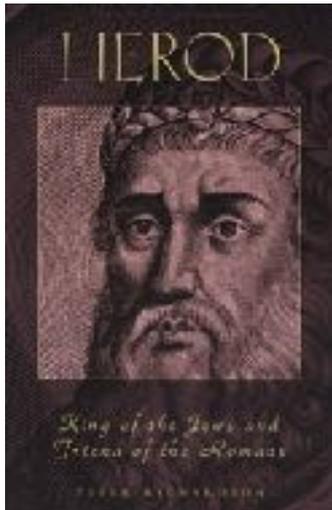
Because the time of Zechariah, John the Baptist, and Jesus are so far from us, it is easy to de-contextualise, to sanitise it, to remove the humanity from it, to deify it, and render it so holy as to not at times reflect historical reality. We tend to read the Bible as an ethereal (heavenly) text rather than a terrestrial (earthly) text. To help us understand the gospel text, it is important to note that during Zachariah, John the Baptist, and Jesus' time, during the Roman Empire, there was a majority who were poor and oppressed militarily

by a minority. And during this oppression, we had many different people with varying degrees of patience or impatience to end that oppression. We had collaborators, like Zacchaeus the tax collector. We had Jesus who may have been middle of the road. And we had had John the Baptist and ‘zealots’ who would be the most revolutionary.

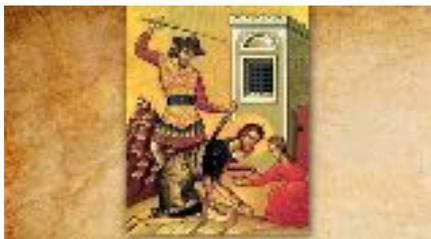


Later in Luke’s gospel, we learn much about the contentious relationship between John and Jesus (Luke 7:18-23). John and his disciples did more than baptise.⁶ They engaged in advocacy, justice-seeking. They were ‘calling-out’ the rulers of the land for their oppression. Notably, they did this in the desert - perhaps where it was a little safer to do so than in the city.

⁶ Baptism was an adapted Jewish tradition of ritual bathing called the ‘*mikvah*’.



For example, John the Baptist and Jesus despised Herod Antipas as a venal debauchee and Roman ‘stooge’. Regarding Antipas’ wife, John humiliatingly charged, ‘It is not lawful for you to have her’” (Matthew 14:3-4). Jesus also defied Antipas: ‘Go tell that fox, “I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal”” (Luke 13:32).



While laudable, to seek justice was a dangerous occupation that easily got one stoned, thrown-off a cliff, decapitated (as was John) or crucified (as was Jesus).

While John the Baptist is holed-up in jail, awaiting his fate, John’s disciples desperately search-out Jesus and Jesus’ disciples. If we

read between the lines, and if we are sensitive to undercurrents, John's disciples are reprimanding Jesus and Jesus' disciples for not moving fast enough and for not pressing the 'realm of God' campaign hard enough. They ask Jesus, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Luke 7:20). I firmly believe we are to read this question as: 'Since you are *not* doing it, who is going to? Since you are doing so little, so slowly, shall we wait for someone else to do your job?!'

John's disciples perhaps exhibited less patience than Jesus and Jesus' disciples did.



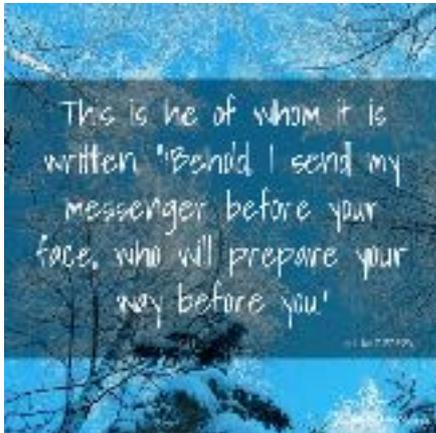
And rightly so! John was in prison and time was running-out for him. John's disciples were familiar with Malachi's prophesy that promised that the 'Day of Judgement' will come, that day when sorcerers, adulterers, and perjurers, those who defraud their labourers, those that oppress widows and orphans, and those who deny migrant refugees of justice will be punished (Malachi 3:5). So, the accusing questions to Jesus were not unwarranted. "What are you waiting for?!" John's disciples asked Jesus and his movement.



Jesus was understandably a bit miffed at the skeptical reprimand coming from the Baptist movement (Luke 7:22-23) and said: ‘What do you mean I am “not doing anything”’? You want more than healing? You want more than raising the dead? 24/7 I am out here with the crowds attending to these sheep who are utterly lost’. One senses that Jesus wishes to be more tactical in his ministry than John does, and thus preserve it for a little while. Jesus wishes to build-up, develop, empower his disciples and his movement first (for the long-haul) before he, like John, is arrested and killed.

In this testy exchange between the two movements, one can detect different degrees of patience and different tactics. Perhaps for John, a radical, even violent, divine intervention would imminently inaugurate the realm of God. Perhaps, for Jesus, it is by the gradual grooming of the interior (the heart) that the realm of God is inaugurated. For Jesus, the realm of God is existential (spiritual, though with profoundly practical implications) more than it is political

(revolutionary). No matter the tactics, the theme of patient expectant waiting is heard in Malachi and Luke.



Quickly, as John's disciples were departing, Jesus reconsidered his defensive overreaction and perhaps realising his fate will be like John's, expressed sympathy and admiration for John (Luke 7:24-28). Quoting Malachi 3:1, Jesus publicly affirmed John and his ministry.



Friends, here is my point: I am as sick and tired of the rubbish in this world as you are. I am as sick and tired of it as was Malachi, as was John the Baptist, as was Jesus. If we examine John the Baptist and Jesus, we are left with a curious mix of impatience and patience. In John, we saw an impatient boldness that was dangerous and in Jesus a patient perseverance that knew no limits - neither in time nor space.



We are all awaiting the realm of God. Let us do so *impatiently*, always asking “Are we there yet?” Yet, at the same time let us do so *patiently*, never giving up hope if our efforts do not yet foster the realm’s fulfilment.

Let us therefore, like Jesus, seek the realm of God, patiently, and in love. All of the scriptures this morning tell us: “Please, Be Patient. Someone Will Be With You Shortly”. Welcome to ‘The Waiting Room’.



This was the word of God. And it was preached to the people of God and the people of God responded: “Amen”.