

While We Wait: James 5:7-12
a sermon by Heather Thomsen

You've dialed a 1-800 number to talk to customer service. You connect to an automated menu and spend minutes filtering through all the menu options, only to realize none of the options apply to your situation. So you push a bunch of buttons until you're finally connected to a real human being, who immediately asks to put you on hold. You spend the next handful of minutes listening to Kenny G playing a smooth jazz arrangement of My Heart Will Go On from the movie Titanic. Suddenly, you hear a long beep on the other end of the line, and the call goes dead. How are you feeling at this point? I suspect most of us would feel frustrated, irritated, annoyed, or impatient. Patience does not come to easily to some of us.

When I was in high school, our family had this super sweet 1994, seafoam green Ford Taurus that I was sometimes allowed to drive. I know, right? One day I was waiting in line to turn in to the parking lot of my high school, but there was a red light that had caused a line of cars to block the entrance to the parking lot. My highly developed 16 year old brain decided that, rather than waiting for the light to turn green and the line of cars to move forward, it would be more efficient to drive on the shoulder to avoid the line, and simply hop the curb in order to get into the parking lot. Of course I didn't realize that the seafoam green Ford Taurus didn't have suspension shocks or anything at all to help it hop the curb. So let's just say the cement sidewalk and the right side of the seafoam green Ford Taurus had quite the loud, impactful interaction in those moments. As if that car needed any more character.

I guess patience is a virtue for lots of reasons, only one of which is to avoid spending extra money on inflated car insurance rates.

Unfortunately for me, and for impatient people like me, this idea of patience and waiting is prominent in our text from James. And not just in James. It's rather inescapable in entire the biblical narrative. From captivity, to exile, to anticipating the coming Messiah, time and time again God's people had to wait. I wonder if the theme of waiting is so prominent in the story of God's people precisely *because* it can be so difficult, and because we need to hear it time and time again.

Each of us spends significant seasons of our lives waiting for something. Earlier this year, some of you were waiting on acceptance letters to school. Others of you are waiting to find out if you made the team. Some are waiting on job offers or test results. Maybe you are waiting to see a loved one who you haven't seen in a while. Some may be waiting to move forward in a relationship while others are waiting to finalize the end of a relationship. Waiting takes up significant mental and emotional space in our lives. **And whether we want it to or not, waiting shapes us.**

Pregnancy is one of the most tangible ways that we see people's lives transformed by the process of waiting. Whether you have been pregnant, or a relative or friend has, most of us have some experience with the process of pregnancy. I have three close friends who are all due within a couple weeks, and another friend who is due in July. The journey of pregnancy has been absolutely necessary for each of these friends as they have grappled with expectations; waited anxiously for lab results and news from doctors; and processed the upcoming changes in their lives, and the fears and joys that accompany those changes. One friend commented that the months of waiting for her baby's birth have shaped her by affording time to deeply feel and experience her fluctuating emotions, and to allow her heart to be prepared for the baby's arrival. She said that she would not be in the joyful place of anticipation that she is now had she not done the hard work of waiting over the last 8 months.

This passage in James is about having patience in waiting. The crux of James' point here is not **WHAT his audience is waiting for, but rather HOW they will be shaped in the waiting.**

Waiting in line at a traffic light or Disneyland is one thing. But waiting for something when you don't know if or when it will come is entirely different. And *this* is the sort of patience to which James exhorts his audience.

So there is this farmer who is waiting for rain. If the rain doesn't fall, the crops don't grow. Easy enough to understand. But there's more. It's been raining a lot here in Winston. The rain makes things beautiful and green and lush. But that's not the kind of rain for which the farmer is waiting. For the farmer, rain was the difference between life and death. James' middle eastern audience would have imagined a farmer in a near-desert climate, not unlike the Negev Wilderness in Israel. In addition to living in an environment that was difficult for crop-growing, the farmer would likely have been poor. If the rain didn't come, the crops wouldn't grow, and the farmer and his family may not have had a source of income. In other words, without the rain, the farmer has no guaranteed way of keeping his family alive. And yet, James says, the farmer waits *patiently*.

Would you be patient in the farmer's situation? Patience would not be my immediate response to his circumstances. I can imagine myself becoming frantic, trying to control something that is out of my control, and taking out my anxiety on those around me. Perhaps this sheds light on James' exhortation in verse 9 to not grumble against one another. Waiting does not always bring out our best selves.

Mike Ford, who attends our church, has a brother who lives on a ranch in San Luis Obispo, CA. The success of the ranch has depended on his ability to drill for water on his property and use the water to resource his ranch. But because of the severe drought in California over the last couple years, the well on his property dried up, and Mike's brother was faced with a crippling dilemma: should he spend thousands of dollars to drill another well, without the assurance that he would find water there? Or should he do nothing and pray for rain, saving his money in case of emergency? Or should he sell the ranch and cut the losses on his decades-long career as a rancher?

In the James passage, the rain came for the farmer. Mike Ford's brother did end up drilling in a new spot on his property, and thankfully found more water. But we know that the rain does not always come. And this haunts us. The questions of "why not?" echo in the darkest corners of our hearts and minds when the job falls through, when the relationship crumbles, when the pregnancy fails. Or maybe we are simply waiting for God, and we are afraid He won't show up.

Is there value to waiting for something that doesn't pan out the way we hoped? In these situations, it's easy for the waiting to seem futile. But I think James would argue that it is in fact the **process of waiting** - perhaps even more so than the outcome that unfolds - that shapes us. Waiting can be hard. But it is significant because of the way it forms us as God's people. And that's why James points his audience to the example of the prophets.

The biblical prophets speak on behalf of God. Sometimes the prophets indict God's people for turning away from God. Sometimes the prophets offer words of comfort and encouragement. Often times, the prophets speak out against corrupt rulers and systems. Throughout these prophetic texts, there is a consistent message that unites many of the biblical prophets: they challenge God's people to wait. To wait for the coming Messiah. To bear up with patience in the midst of suffering. To eagerly anticipate the fullness of God's kingdom on earth. **The prophets call God's people to hopeful waiting.**

When James mentions the prophets in the context of suffering and patience, one thing he could be referring to is the prophetic anticipation of the Messiah. We know the famous words of Isaiah 9: "to us, a child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders, and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Those are powerful words. What we don't always pay attention to is the surrounding context of Isaiah's message. Isaiah is indicting Israel for turning away from God and becoming corrupt. He is predicting the invasion of Israel by the Assyrian empire, as a consequence of Israel's infidelity to YHWH.

Punishment is coming, y'all. he says. But, even in the midst of this coming judgment, Isaiah exhorts God's people to have hope that God would provide for their healing. And that healing would come in the form of the Messiah, the righteous and just ruler who would establish God's kingdom in righteousness and peace.

Keep in mind, these words were communicated around 700 years before the birth of Jesus, the Messiah. That is a long, long time to wait for healing and restoration. That is a long, long time to hold onto hope. The characters in the Star Wars galaxy think they waited a long time for the balance in the Force to be restored. Israel puts them to shame. Think of the generations of people who lived and died without seeing any movement toward what God had promised. How do you think they might have felt? And how might they feel about this God who can't seem to deliver on what he's promised?

Some failed miserably at their call to wait on God's actions and God's timing. This is perhaps not unlike me driving on the shoulder of the road and trying to hop the curb to cut into the parking lot of my high school. In the end, it didn't save any time but instead damaged my parents' car and caused harm not only to my bank account but also to my pride. It's this sort of impatience that litters Israel's history with accounts of people acting out of a lack of trust: demanding a King rather than trusting the leaders God was providing for them; proclaiming false Messiahs because they were tired of waiting for the one God was preparing; taking their political situation into their own hands rather than waiting for God to deliver them. They were impatient and unwilling to wait. What does this say about them? And what does it say about their view of God?

But we are privy to a chapter in Israel's story that most of them never lived into. Later in the biblical narrative we see the most profound demonstration of God's promise-keeping. The story of Simeon and Anna, two prophets in Jerusalem, is a chief example of this. In Luke 2, the reader encounters an old man, Simeon, who is holding the baby Jesus in his arms. We can picture him, with tears in his eyes, sighing: "Ahhhhhh, most good and sovereign God, you have indeed kept your promise. I can now die in peace, because my own eyes have seen the fulfillment of your ancient covenant: this baby is the one who will restore your people, and will bring the light of your salvation to the whole world."

Simeon's beautiful song reveals a **life formed by faithful waiting**. Even after centuries of apparent emptiness for his people, Simeon trusted that God would be faithful. And his response when he held the fulfillment of that promise in his arms is not one of bitterness at how long his people had to wait, or bewilderment at the tiny, fragile form of the Messiah, but one of complete confidence in God's faithfulness. Simeon's response was one of overwhelming joy and contentment. Anna's story is much like Simeon's. They are both beautiful examples of people shaped by the process of waiting - not formed toward bitterness or grumbling, but toward joy and peace.

The story of the Church is a continuation of the story of Israel. But we aren't waiting in the same way that Israel waited. The Messiah has already been given! Salvation has already been accomplished! Thanks be to God! Yet we, too, are called to wait, not for Christ's coming, but for his return. This is what we celebrate during Advent: we re-tell the story of Israel waiting for the Messiah, and in doing so, we practice our own eager anticipation of Christ's return to fully establish God's kingdom and to make all things new. As James reminds his audience, the church, too, is called to hopeful, patient waiting for the coming of the Lord. And this should change the way we live.

But how? How does the summons to patient waiting change the way we live? Here's the kicker: this is not a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps sort of thing. This doesn't involve checking off boxes of things that will make us more patient. It's not a fist-clenching, teeth-gritting effort to make ourselves better. It's a patience that can only be grounded in God's faithfulness. **Waiting shapes us because it allows God to demonstrate his faithfulness.** The only way we can actually wait with patience for things like rain, even when it doesn't come, is *because* the Lord has demonstrated that he keeps his promises.

This is why James includes that ancient Hebrew creed, which we read over and over in the Old Testament: “you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.” It is God’s compassion and mercy - God’s faithful promise-keeping - that anchor our waiting. We cannot wait with patience if we do not trust God to provide. But as we lean with trust into God’s faithfulness we become more faithful people.

There is a couple in our own congregation who have a profound experience of waiting for God to demonstrate faithfulness. This young couple had only been married a few years when the young man began experiencing chronic fatigue and repeated symptoms of illness. A letter from his doctor arrived, indicating very unexpectedly that he needed a kidney transplant - and sooner rather than later. The next handful of months marked a desperate flurry of communication to find a person who would not only be a match for a kidney transplant, but would be willing to make such a big sacrifice. Meanwhile, his health was slowly declining. Day after day passed as the couple prayed and waited, and waited and prayed for a matching donor. The couple learned that the relative who was the most likely potential donor was eliminated from the process because of medical complications. Their situation became more dire. It was in the hopeless despair of the 11th hour that they got word that his brother’s college roommate was a match, and the roommate was all in to donate one of his kidneys. Days later, the two young men were in the hospital together, preparing for the transplant.

The couple describes this as an agonizing process: waiting for a matching donor they weren’t sure they would find, suffering through declining health, and grappling with the terrifying fact that they did not know how this would play out in the end. And yet they say they wouldn’t trade the process, because of the way it shaped them as Christians and as a couple. They were forced to thrust themselves upon the mercy of God. Through that anguished process, their trust in God’s faithfulness developed deep roots. Their own relationship was formed in deeper, more intimate ways than they ever could have imagined. Even in the midst of intense suffering and fear, the season of waiting enabled God’s faithfulness to be revealed to them in profound ways that have forever shaped their trust in God’s mercy, compassion, and providence.

What are you waiting for? How are you being shaped by the waiting?

Look around you. What do you see? My eye is drawn to the tongues of fire hanging above our heads, and the red decorations around the room. Last week we celebrated the Pentecost story of the indwelling of the Spirit, who appeared in the form of tongues of fire above the heads of the disciples. And as I look at these Pentecost decorations, I am reminded of Jesus’ words to his disciples that when the Spirit came to dwell among God’s people, they would be empowered to do even greater things than Jesus himself did. The giving of the Spirit changes the waiting game for us. Because of God’s Spirit within each of us, we are empowered to wait differently. It is not our own efforts or best intentions that anchor our patient waiting, but God’s faithfulness, revealed in Christ and in the outpouring of the Spirit. **When we trust in God’s promises, we are formed into people who can wait with patience precisely because of who God is and what God has done for us.** God’s Spirit dwelling among us gives us the courage, strength and power to live well in the waiting. Our lives become tethered to the compassion, mercy and faithfulness of God. When we lean with patience into our faithful God, we become more faithful people.