

**PATIENCE IN THESE TIMES; ISAIAH 35:1-10, JAMES 5:7-10; DECEMBER 11, 2016; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

We've been living with the prayer of St. Francis this fall – the prayer that says we are called to seek to understand, comfort and love rather than to be understood, comforted and loved. We'll talk more about the application of that prayer to our individual and congregational life in 2017.

I came across another prayer this week, not as well known as St. Francis' but a prayer that has been the staple of many Christians for several centuries. It is called the "Covenant Prayer" by John Wesley:

"I am no longer my own, but yours./Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;/put me to doing, put me to suffering;/let me be employed for you, or laid aside/for you,/exalted for you, or brought low for you;/let me be full,/let me be empty,/let me have all things,/let me have nothing;/I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things/to your pleasure and disposal.../I am yours...."

That prayer sounds a bit odd in a society that lusts for self-control and self-direction. Yet, it was and still is said by Methodists and Wesleyans on New Year's Eve as a way of entering the new year and declaring just who is in control.

I offer this prayer today as the full embodiment of what Isaiah and James are talking about in the lessons we heard this morning.

Isaiah, hardly talking but singing, in verse, a poem as sublime and glorious as any poetry or prose in the sixty-six books of the bible or literature of Western civilization. And James, in a grounded, disciplined statement to a church aware that the second coming of Christ and the renewal and restoration of creation are not imminent and, therefore, he proposes a shift to patience and watchfulness.

I want to add that these readings, as the lectionary selections so often do, hit the mark of where we are living in December 2016 in North America, in the wealthiest nation on earth.

Despite our abundance we are ever more aware as a body politic, as a nation, that there are many in our midst – enough to elect a President – who have been socially, economically and politically marginalized and left behind.

I'm thinking of Mike Schaff, Sally Cappel and Lee Sherman who Arlie Russell Hochschild interviews in her book *Strangers in Their Own Land*. They live in sw Louisiana and either work for or worked in the petro-chemical industry; an industry lured to their state by a governor who slashed school and healthcare budgets by \$1.6 billion to offer incentives to corporations who have mined and drilled onshore and offshore, and caused two of the worst oil and chemical spills in American history. This is an industry that has won the title "cancer alley" for the region; laid off workers, bought up and displaced whole communities and has caused Louisiana to lose a football field sized patch of land to the Gulf of Mexico every hour due to the erosion of the bayou.

The Schaffs, Cappels and Shermans will tell you we are as far from universal justice and joy for God's people and creation envisioned by the bible as any blue state voter concerned about climate change and corporate greed would claim. If the election taught us anything it taught us we have further to go to reach these ends than we knew and even before finding common ground, we need to understand each other.

Therefore, to offer a picture of complete individual and communal healing – a day envisioned and ushered in by the God of Israel, may seem so far fetched as to belong to the realm of fantasy. And to recite the biblical promise that such a day will come could be construed as foolish at best and cruel at worst.

This is what Karl Marx railed against when he called religion the 'opiate of the people' – the promise of some far off fictitious kingdom when what was needed was a revolution by the workers; a taking up of arms and fight of the proletariat against the decadence and sloth of bourgeois elites and business owners. Isn't this the fight many propose today whether on the left or the right? Just as Marxism became a religion so Tea Partyism and Liberalism, thinking they can usher in the kingdom, suffer political hubris and dishonesty.

As much as I subscribe to the policies and practices of progressive, science-based, politics and reasonable regulation of business and banking, I cannot claim that these solutions for the common good were handed down from some mountaintop in tablets of stone. Which is to say not only policies can be flawed but so can the humans on the left and right who enact and enforce them.

And as flawed our species is and as deeply flawed and complex (though not without his gifts) as I believe the president-elect is, you would think we would withhold Messiah-status for our leaders and give up our expectations that we, of our own accord, are capable of transforming our world. As good as any leader may be, we will always be held back by human nature, by the long ago revelation in Eden that just as indelibly as we are imprinted with the image of God we are just as powerfully attracted by the temptation to be like God in our life as individuals, in our various ideologies, and as a nation.

I realize this is where some will say, "What else do we have but our own devices for repairing the world and healing humankind?" But people of faith reserve hope for a spirit or vision or energy beyond and bigger than human potential and capacity to bring renewal.

Given the unbroken witness over millennia of God's intervention into human history as the bible claims, and which many of you claim and have shared with me in your personal histories when some power beyond you enabled you – we look not to ourselves alone but to God and God's purposes for a day of reckoning and renewal.

We are in similar circumstances to James' 1<sup>st</sup> c. Christians or Isaiah's 6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE Jews who found themselves waiting and, finally, entrusting their hopes and dreams not just to the magistrate of the state but to the Creator of life.

What is invoked today is not only the promise that God is moving toward humanity over the course of time, but that humanity is called to move toward God with watchful waiting and patience.

But the problem with patience is that it sounds so stagnant; so submissive. And this is where Wesley's Covenant Prayer comes in. Being patient isn't about just hanging out until the trumpet sounds – it is staying focused, active and open to being used in anyway great or small in preparation for that great day whether we see it or not.

John Glenn – the great American hero who died last week and was well into his 90s was among scores of young men who applied to become the first class of astronauts. As it turns out, Glenn was just over 5'11" (the height limit for the space program) and so, in addition to keeping his nose to the books in preparation for his interviews and tests, he could be found studying at his desk with a pile of books on his head to compress his height to the required 5'11". That's waiting with anticipation.

As a test pilot for the United States Marines John Glenn was an excellent candidate for the program President Kennedy challenged the nation to undertake that would put a man on the moon. That is, Glenn knew how to handle specialized high speed aircraft but he had no clue, nor did anyone else for that matter, including all the scientists and aeronautical engineers at NASA that we would actually be capable of putting someone on the moon. It was an outrageous proposal, but we embraced it as a nation. And, indeed, in just ten years that amazing vision and feat was accomplished.

That's the kind of not just dedication but faith Isaiah and James are talking about. I love Isaiah's defining God's restoration of the earth as inclusive of a restored and luxuriant natural world – a desert transformed to blossoming even as those with weak hands and feeble knees will be made strong and just as waters shall break forth and streams give life to the dry land the eyes of the blind will be opened, the deaf unstopped, and the speechless sing for joy. Nor shall predators lie in wait – but all shall gather in safety and return in joy.

We face formidable obstacles to that kind of complete renewal and justice – climate change alone, now gives us a brief window of opportunity – a matter of just a few decades some scientists say – until quirky storms and weather events that now cause unexpected interruption and loss of life at great cost, will give way to global catastrophic consequences like famine, flooding and drought of unimaginable proportion and war.

What Isaiah offers us is unabashed confidence in the power of God to save humankind. Without God's powerful word and powerful presence, both creation and disabled humanity are lost, hopeless, and condemned to a world shrouded in death. God's intention is to save; in order to save, God will both make reparation for all that is lost and will avenge the powers of death that prevent fullness of life.

What Isaiah is talking about is a project much bigger than putting a human on the moon. The situation of humanity and creation are identical –

both are in pitiful condition, from melting ice caps and stranded polar bears to ISIS and a hell on earth in Syria we desperately yearn for rescue.

The poet envisions the day when creation will sing for joy.

These readings invite us to get beyond what one critic calls “our managed rationality” to affirm that God does what the world thinks is not possible.

And for a people who calculate and calibrate their lives within the perimeters of spread sheet and doom-loops James has a special message today. The writer of this letter is not banking on the apocalyptic intervention of God – that other New Testament writers who refer to ‘the Lord being close at hand’ expect will happen.

Rather James offers the example of a farmer who does his portion of work to produce the crops and then waits with expectation and confidence that God will do God’s portion – and send the predictable early and late Palestinian rains. Here is an important nuance: the vision and hope for a new order in James is based not so much on God’s invasion of the world as it is upon the absolute reliability of God’s promises. As the farmer relies upon God to send rain, the faithful may and must rely upon God. Patience derives from such certitude.

Let me make one further distinction – patience does not arise from some general conviction about the virtue of patience. But patience, here, is that of suffering people who know God will vindicate them.

James gives us the kind of patience that is born out of oppression and thrives in response to injustice. Patience is not acquiescence but active confidence and ultimate accountability.

Imagine if John Glenn was unwilling to place his life in the hands of the scientists of NASA and the big vision to get the moon someday. Imagine if he thought that notion fundamentally flawed and a foolish waste of resources if not life itself.

You see we are wired to believe in something bigger than ourselves; something life giving and life affirming; we are, as a species, hopeful at our core – though much about the world counsels skepticism and doubt.

The texts today speak to the image of God within us, that part of us that has enabled the Spirit of God to take up residence in this all too often dark and troubled planet and bring hope and life.

Isaiah and James call us today to remember that God, not we, is the one in charge – and to dream and hope big enough for a world good enough that we are willing to say with old John Wesley: “I am no longer my own but yours...I freely, wholeheartedly yield all things to our pleasure and disposal.” Come Lord Jesus come. Amen.