

Third Sunday of Advent

December 15, 2019

James 5:7-11:

“Living in Patience”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In a small book titled "*The Book of Job in Its Significance for Preaching and the Care of Souls*," the Lutheran Theologian August O. W. Pieper gives an account of an incident that personally happened to him when he was a young pastor. I would like to share it with you this morning because I believe that it helps to pave the way for a good understanding of our epistle lesson. Here's the account:

The present writer experienced the case of a farmer whose leg had been torn off by a threshing machine. The man was extraordinarily well-informed and devout. But in his horrible pains he gave vent to such cursing, abusive language, and accusations against God and man that a cold shiver went through you. His pious wife embraced him, laid her hand on his mouth, and weeping, cried to him, "Patience, patience! Even if the heart breaks, do not quarrel with God in heaven."

Having entered the room and standing meanwhile at the door, I heard with horror all that happened; and I (a young pastor at that time) was about first of all to say some hard words to him. But when I approached his bed, looked at his features distorted with pain, and saw that he did not have long to live, I called to him, "...do not fear, for I am with you, do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous hand" (Is 41:10). "Lord Jesus, receive me, a poor ...," he cried. The word died on his tongue, his senses left him, and in a few minutes he was a corpse. The gospel verse had obviously not been a mistake.

There are moments in the Christian life when the heart breaks. Life is going well and then, all of the sudden, life takes a turn for the worse. In those moments, faith is confronted with the possibility of spiritual death. This might cause one to wonder if the farmer whose leg had been torn off by the threshing machine made it to heaven. Or, maybe we should simply ask: Can faith survive when horrible moments give way to cursing, abusive language, and even accusations against God? The answer is "yes." There can be times when our souls are embittered, when our hearts are pricked, when we are brutish and ignorant like beasts, but faith and forgiveness still remains. As the Psalmist writes, "Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory (Psalm 73)." In the midst of struggle, the love of God in the cross of Jesus and the forgiveness of sins is our sure guide and counsel that pushes back all that would attempt to destroy our faith.

Our epistle lesson for this Third Sunday in our "*Advent Journey to Strengthen Our Living*" is from the book of James and serves as the basis for our theme: "*Living In Patience*." We are bid to be patient with one another and in the midst of suffering. We wait for the Lord. James writes:

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets

who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful (James 5:7-11).

In a single day Job loses all of his goods and children. Next, he struck by a horrible disease. He is forsaken by his closest and truest friends who label him as a hypocrite and godless man. All that Satan throws at Job is designed for Job to conclude that God is his enemy. Job is a believer in the Savior who is to come and is counted as perfect and upright. In addition, he fears God and turns away from evil. But, he also carries with him the sinful flesh and struggles with his sufferings. He engages in passionate disputing with God, charges him of injustice, and proves that there is still blindness in his heart.

In Job, we see faith confronted with everything that can lead to spiritual death. The only thing that keeps him sane in the midst of all of his struggling and unanswered questions is the simple truth, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me (Job 19:25-27)!" Also, he is able to say in another place, "But he [God] knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold (Job 23:10)." Despite all that Job went through and reveals from his sinful flesh, he did not lose faith. He was steadfast.

Every child of God is a saint and a sinner. Job was no different. What we see in Job is faith under pressure. What we see is a battle between faith in the death and resurrection of Christ, and a sinful nature that would lead us back to spiritual death and a life of unbelief and loss. The tossing and turning that results from all kinds of trials emboldens the sinful nature to quarrel with God on many different levels. One is confronted with what faith says in contrast with what the sinful nature says. The only refuge and strength of faith is in the objective love of God in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the battle that can rage for some time, our prayer is that we always reach the moment where we learn or relearn to cover our mouths before the Lord and simply confess our sins as Job himself confessed (Job 42:2-6):

I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. "Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?" Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. "Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me." I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

God is never our enemy, as the cross and empty tomb proves. God's purpose is way beyond our many temporal purposes. Consequently, our quarreling with God always fails to embrace "things too wonderful" for us, "things we do not know," as Job says it. The Almighty does not owe us an answer to the many quarrels that rage within our sinful hearts - quarrels such as "What have I done to deserve this? What have I done to suffer like this? Why has God marked me for so much trouble? How is it that others who are far worse than me get along so well in life while I suffer continually one thing after another. Will it ever come to an end?" After such quarreling with God, which we all frequently do, and when faith is stunned to find out that God does not owe us an answer, and when once again it dawns on us that whatever

he does is for the purpose of our salvation, we cannot help but to be like Job and despise ourselves and repent from quarreling against him. After all, God loves us in the salvation of the cross and promises nothing but good when everything is all said and done. It is captured beautifully in Psalm 27:13-14, "I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living! Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!"

"Living in Patience!" The coming of the Lord is at hand. In the meantime, whatever comes your way, no matter how often it comes your way, you are bid to wait for the Lord, believing that whatever is lost in this life will be well compensated in the life that is to come. What you give up today is for eternity. "You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful," our epistle lesson says. Consider what is at the beginning of the book of Job and what is at the end. And don't forget what is in the middle.

Job said, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord (1:21)." God sustains a righteous person's faith throughout the most severe crises, and that he does through the cross of the Redeemer who lives and who will stand on the earth. The Lord is compassionate and merciful in every way, all the time. The purpose of the Lord is to finally bring us to him, and nothing matters but getting us there in the end - "to look on the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." This purpose is powerfully understood in the compassion and mercy that was expressed toward Job at the end of the book. Though he loses just about everything at the beginning, the Lord blesses Job at the end with double. Jesus reminds us in Matthew 19:29 that whatever is lost in this life, will be restored a hundredfold in the life that is forever.

Our Old Testament lesson (Is. 35) exhorts us: "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, 'Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense [Compensation] of God. He will come and save you.'" Or, in the words that Pastor Pieper quoted to the farmer who had lost his leg in the threshing machine and was dying: "...do not fear, for I am with you, do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous hand (Is 41:10)."

May God then strengthen your *"Living in Patience."*

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott