

Strong Patience  
James 5:7-10

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Redlands First United Methodist Church  
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Counting with an Advent Calendar or an Advent Chain *doesn't make Christmas come any faster*—it's just what we do *while we wait*. Many of us adults, rushing around to get ready for Christmas during the next four weeks, will wish at some point that we had *more* time before Christmas. We'll be *more than happy* with a long Advent Chain

Waiting involves a *how* and a *what*. *What* do we wait for, and *how* do we wait?

We are all *waiting* for Christmas spiritually. That is, we are waiting for the day that we celebrate as the birth of Jesus Christ because it *renews our realization that the Kin(g)dom of God is already at hand*. Christmas means for us spiritually that there is no more waiting for some messiah to save us in any way. Jesus Christ was born; he lived—he ushered in an awareness of the Kin(g)dom of God! *So, during advent, we wait for the day of the year that reminds us that we really don't have to wait any longer*.

This is a very different kind of waiting than that of the first century Christians and Jews to whom James wrote this general letter. If this letter were written by any of the cast of people whom we know about, the most likely candidate is James, the brother of Jesus. James was one of the prominent leaders of the first generation of the Christian movement. This letter was clearly written by a Jewish person who believed Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah.<sup>1</sup> James was quite egalitarian; he really considered all humans to be brothers and sisters. He condemned boasting or arrogance and thought people should focus on the community rather than the individual. The people who would hear this letter would likely consider themselves poor.

“You always tell me what to do.” If you are a parent, teacher, aunt, uncle, or grandparent who hears that complaint very often, then the next time you hear, “You always tell me what to do,” you might respond, “I’m not as bad as James!” Of course then you’ll be asked, “Who is James,” and you can say, “Oh, the brother of Jesus.” I’m imagining a reasonable response to *that* would be, “How do you know?” Anyway, James, or whoever wrote the book of James, was quite a moralist. There are supposedly 108 verses in this letter (you’re welcome to count them) and James managed to tell people what to do 59 times.

*What were the people to whom he wrote waiting for?* They believed that the end of time would come in *their life time*—there would be judgment; Jesus would return. That’s what they were waiting for. James sought to tell them *how* to wait. He focused on the “how.”

His advice: **strengthen your heart**. At that time when someone said “heart,” they meant more what we’d think of as “intentions.” James told the people to wait with **strong patience**, to stay focused, like the farmer who waits for the precious crop from the earth, patient until the crop receives the early and late rains. He was afraid that if they were not patient, they would grumble and turn on each other. “If you’re **impatient**,” James encouraged, “tell God...don’t take it out on each other.” You can imagine such advice if it were given to poor persons in various situations throughout history. Don’t take out your frustrations and anger on each other. From Watts to Cincinnati and in many other cities

and countries, poor persons who are *waiting* for good to come often grow weary of waiting, and it's understandable, but sad, that they end up taking it out on each other. James said to his audience, likely a somewhat poor audience, "Be strong with your patience."

What are *you and I* waiting for? Some Christians are attentive to the "end of times," but most of us, I perceive, are not waiting with such intensity for that; it's been a long time since the Early Christians had that expectation.

What are we waiting for, then, this Christmas?

- Some of us who are lonely wait to find a good friend.
- Some of us who are ill or have certain worrisome symptoms wait to see doctors, wait for diagnoses . . . wait for healing.
- Those teenagers who are 14 wait to be 16, so they can drive, or 18 so they can vote, or probably 21... Of course then they eagerly wait for the next milestone, when they can get into movies more cheaply, when they are 55.
- Some of us wait for some form of reconciliation with another.
- Some of us wait till we can with strength let go of one of our faults.
- Hundreds of thousands wait in prison.
- Some of us wait to find employment that fits our abilities and passions.
- With our country still engaged in war, we wait for peace.

You fill in the "what"—what *you* wait for.

Now consider the "how." How do we wait? That's what James was interested in. He thought we should wait with **hearts strengthened**, with **strong patience**.

I'd like for you to think with me. If you wanted to get to the top of an oak tree, *how* could you get there?

**1. You could climb an oak tree.**

**2. You could sit on an acorn.**

There are two ways to wait: We can wait passively—I'm going to call that "**wimpy waiting**." Or, we can wait with what James called "strong patience." I'm going to call that "**active anticipation**."

We can wait for Christmas or even for Peace on earth, with *wimpy waiting or active anticipation*.

If we sit on an acorn, we're wimpily waiting.

If we climb an oak tree, we're entering into active anticipation.

Look at the 14 year old. She can wait wimpily to drive, complaining that it's taking a long time, doing very little to get ready—or, she can start observing adults who drive, for example, where they hold the steering wheel. She can begin to pay more attention to directions. She can take "Drivers' Ed" etc. That's *active anticipation*—so that when she's 16, or whenever she's allowed, she can be a good driver.

If we would like a good friend, we can *actively anticipate* good relationships, though it's very easy to get into *wimpy waiting* modes—expecting a good friend to jump out of our closet without any effort on our part.

**Isn't it the same with Peace on Earth? That's a humongous goal, but it's hard to be followers of the Prince of Peace without *expecting that peace on earth is possible*.** Yet, we can, even in relation to peace, wait wimpily or with active anticipation.

Two rather well-known children's books help us to consider how to wait with *active anticipation*.

One is the *Little Engine that Could*. Recall that a train needs help to get over the mountain just ahead. So, the train actively anticipated a solution. It persisted in asking a number of other trains to help, to no avail until a Little Blue Engine managed to help the train to get over the mountain. The train needed assistance, but it didn't succumb to *wimpy waiting*. The stranded train was determined to climb the mountain, so it asked for help *until it found* the Little Blue Engine that *thought it could, thought it could, thought it could*. Together the two vehicles *actively anticipated* the other side of the mountain.

We might say that the **train and the Little Blue Engine climbed an Oak Tree; they did not sit on an acorn.**

I mentioned there are two children's books that help us consider waiting in what James called a mode of "Strong Patience." The other book is also wonderful—*Frederick*. Frederick is a field mouse. Frederick sat still while the other mice prepared for winter, squirreling away food for all—(do field mice "squirrel" food away?)... To the other mice it sure seemed Frederick was *wimpily waiting* for winter. Yet, here's what happened: When the cold days came and the mice ran out of the supplies they had stored up, they all looked to Frederick, accusatorily, asking him what *he had to contribute*. Frederick surprised them; he was prepared. He asked them to *imagine the warmth of summer*, the colors of spring...he shared **poetry**. Frederick had been *actively anticipating* winter all along—but his was an *interior activity*, not a visible physical preparation...

Well known spiritual giants of the last century exemplify James' idea of waiting with **strength of heart**. There are of course others, but Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi are examples of people who mastered *active anticipation* of very big goals. Both of them were deeply influenced by Jesus. Gandhi was of course Hindu, but he was educated in England, where he was given the *Bible*, read it, and revered it deeply.<sup>2</sup>

We sometimes call what Gandhi did, to achieve huge goals, "Passive Resistance." However, that is completely the opposite of what it should be. Gandhi's word for his "how" of waiting was **Satyagraha**, holding fast to truth, with no violence whatsoever."<sup>3</sup>

Gandhi spent days, months, preparing himself to address crucial human concerns.<sup>4</sup> For example, he *actively anticipated* those at the very lowest of the Hindu caste system freed from being considered "untouchables." He encouraged others to "touch" them—be with them.<sup>5</sup> He *actively anticipated* with every fiber of his heart a world of equals, very much like James sought—a time when we all, no matter our faiths, ages, beliefs—would fully touch and treat everyone kindly, with zero violence.

Gandhi, like Frederick the field mouse, spent a good deal of time thinking, imagining, praying, getting his **heart strengthened**, as James suggested. He is said to have muttered many times a day was, "What to do? What to do?"<sup>6</sup> Gandhi waited for instructions from what he called his "inner voice."<sup>7</sup> Reading his biography, I was fascinated with how often he would insist upon waiting to do what he had already planned, to be *sure* it was according to his "inner voice."<sup>8\*</sup>

So, what about us, we people who are waiting today both for Christmas and for our individual and collective goals?

Since this has been the week of Thanksgiving, I prepared this sermon and considered myself done with it on Tuesday. John and I spent a couple days in the desert. But, I kept "actively anticipating" this sermon. First, I pondered about "Worry." I thought, "It's easy to worry if we wait for a goal wimpily." But then I realized that we also can worry while we anticipate actively. There is a difference, though. If we are

active, then we have a sense of engagement with the goal, and even if we worry a bit, we are less the victim of worry. For example, we can worry about the future of the earth and humankind on earth. Now, we could worry while we wait wimpily. However, it's definitely the case that if we take on, as a passion, caring for the earth, then our very activity in trying to help matters tends to diminish our worry—because we have joined with others who are making a difference.

After I dealt with the intruding worrisome thoughts about worry, in relation to the two kinds of waiting, I began to be filled with lots of other thoughts, so that I had a hard time sleeping. I chuckled, because just last week I purchased homeopathic medication that is a natural way to help with sleeplessness. I learned a new word as I read the bottle. It said that it helped with “overactive mind.” Think about this: how do we go about waiting with active anticipation (for personal or big communal goals) yet not have *such* activity of mind as to have an *overactive mind*? My overactive mind then remembered the phrase, “Mindfulness.” That's used a lot in meditation... but it's suggested as *a way of life*. The night before Christmas we just may not get lots of sleep... and maybe a night or two during Advent, as we get excited about upcoming events. However, in general, as we wait for all the things we wait for, we might achieve what James suggested, strong patience, if we have balance—enough active anticipation, but also, trust.

To underscore, we can use this time to cultivate *active anticipation* of peace. All of us can be like Frederick, working to **strengthen our hearts** as we *interiorly actively anticipate* Peace. For me one challenge is just to remember about war—it's so far away for us. It's hard for most of us even to think about what's happening in another building. If you have a two year old in the nursery right now, you probably think occasionally about what is going on in the Education Building. If not, we can easily sit in this sanctuary and forget all about the children and teachers this very hour in that building!

Whether waiting for peace, for relatives to arrive, or for dreams to come true, we can ask ourselves, “HOW am I waiting?” Am I sitting on an acorn or climbing a tree? Others may not know for sure *how* we are waiting, for we may *look* more like Frederick the field mouse than the train that kept asking for help, but *we ourselves know* our *interior thoughts* and whether James would give us a “High 5”—whether we are working on **strengthening our hearts**...as we wait wisely.

\*At thirty-two Gandhi was indeed impatient. He was “eager to effect change wherever he went.” He is quoted as saying, “I am here to do anything that is not beyond my capacity.”<sup>9</sup>

But, spiritual strength and wise decisions for action are not made all at once. Gandhi's transition from a man well dressed like the leading Englishmen, to a peasant who lived simply and wore peasant wrap “began first in his heart and mind” before it did in his dress or home furnishings.<sup>10</sup> Gandhi was an incredible combination of Frederick the field mouse who actively anticipated within and the Little Engine that Could that actively anticipated with bold outward action.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup> . It was written about the same time Paul wrote his letters.

<sup>2</sup> He lived both in South African and in India where the contexts were primarily Islamic and Hindu.

<sup>3</sup> Wolpert, Stanley. *Gandhi's Passion: The Life and Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 3, 66.

<sup>4</sup> For thirty years he *actively anticipated* the independence of India from British rule

<sup>5</sup> He worked hard to *actively anticipate* the prevention of World War I and II...Loyal to Britain but unwilling to fight, he was a stretcher bearer during World War I, carrying dead and wounded.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Gandhi had no problem acknowledging an error in judgment, a mistake, if he realized he had made one.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 47

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 42

<sup>11</sup> “I must patiently plod in India until I see my way clear for going outside the Indian border.” *Ibid.*, 123.

And “I am biding my time and you will find me leading the country in the field of politics when the country is ready.” *Ibid.*, 131.