

I WAITED PATIENTLY FOR THE LORD

PSALM 40:1-11

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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During the season of Epiphany we are focusing on the Psalms and how reading and praying the Psalms helps us to live well.

Why the Psalms?

On one level, the Psalms aren't very practical. Not many of us typically turn to poetry or music when we are looking for concrete direction for our lives. There are far more "practical" parts of the Bible to turn to, if we are looking for that (the book of James, for example). Scripture has no shortage of clear, direct language regarding what we should do and how we should live.

So why the Psalms?

The Psalms give us language for all of life. The Psalms give us words to borrow to express our highest highs and our lowest lows.

Susanna Heschel describes the Psalms like this:

These are poems written not to formulate religious doctrine, but to give voice to religious emotion—all emotion, from anguish to exaltation, loneliness to thanksgiving, yearning to rage. Where our hearts go, the psalms sing with us.¹

The Psalms hold up a mirror to our lives and they orient all of who we are and what we hope for—the full range of human experience—in prayer.

The psalms sing with us.

And by doing this, the Psalms press us *beyond* our emotions. They reflect the long view of what lives lived honestly before God look like. They lay bare the dispositions and habits that form the building blocks of well-lived lives under the providence of God.

¹ Pamela Greenberg, *The Complete Psalms* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), vii.

The psalm in this weeks readings is Psalm 40.

The big picture here is a psalm of thanksgiving for God's deliverance. For the most part, the language is that of gratitude, exuberance, and praise for God's faithfulness and salvation.

The wonders of the Lord are too many to declare, says David.

But I want to focus on the first line: *I waited patiently for the Lord...*

If you're anything like me, patience is not something that comes easily or naturally.

If you're anything like me, you feel something like how James Howell puts it in his commentary on this passage:

Most of us can read Psalm 40 and admire its words, the depth of thought and faith conveyed in its phrases.

But who among us can with any candor say "I waited patiently for the Lord"? When did I ever wait for anything at all without frustration or anxiety?

We wait in traffic, wait for things to get better, or wait in the waiting room. We are no good at waiting. We want to get moving, we can't bear wasting time, and the clock is ticking while we just don't know what will unfold next. Patience is listed by Paul as a "fruit of the Spirit," which it must be for somebody, somewhere, but not me, or at least not yet. I can't muster it; maybe a miracle will dawn.²

Our culture is notoriously impatient. As citizens of the technologically saturated twenty first century, we are, as perhaps no one before us, people of instant gratification. We want what we want and we want it now. We are conditioned to expect speed and convenience at every turn.

We don't do patience very well.

And we've only mentioned the relatively trivial domain of the ordinary routines of everyday life.

Many of us are familiar with much deeper and darker forms of waiting than this.

Some have watched and waited for years while a loved one slowly dies. Some have endured the long slow death of a relationship that once was full of light and life. Some

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1870

have prayed and prayed and prayed and are *still* praying for children who have wandered far from home. Some have been struck mute by unspeakable tragedy, and have endured long, painful seasons of grief and longing.

Some have experienced what St. John of the Cross famously called “the dark night of the soul.” These are times when God seems utterly absent, times of dark doubt and fear, times when we wonder if there even *is* a God, times when we would give anything in the world to hear a word of hope, but are greeted only by silence.

These are dark, difficult, soul-crushing, slimy pits.

These are places where we feel our grip slipping, where there is nothing to grab on to. These are the places where we desperately need God.

The life of faith cannot be separated from some form of waiting. There is a holy restlessness built into the structure of faith.

Even Jesus himself experienced this. He experienced the deepest pit of despair on a cross on Golgotha. And we know that Jesus reached out to the Psalms during his darkest hour, quoting Psalm 22:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Jesus knows what it’s like to wait and to long in the apparent absence of God.

We know all of this intellectually, I think. We know that we live in a broken world that does not always, or even *often* align itself with our preferences. We know that the life of faith is not a one way ticket to the easy life.

But, like so many things, waiting gets old. We get tired of waiting. We get fed up with the “in between” time in which we live. Sometimes the tension between reality and the object of our hope is painful and disorienting.

Tomáš Halík is Roman Catholic priest from the Czech Republic. In his book *Patience with God*, he writes for what he calls the “Zacchaeuses” of the world—the doubters, the unsure, the noncommittal, those, perhaps, sick of waiting. Throughout the book, Halík maintains that one of the chief differences between Christians and atheists is patience.

Listen to what he says:

St. Paul writes that love is patient. Yes, and faith too is patient, if it really is faith. Faith is patience, in fact. In the same way that love for another person—its strength and authenticity—manifests and proves itself in its patience with the

other, so also is faith present... in a certain form of patience in the face of all of life's difficulties, hardships, and ambiguities. And it is in that patience—and maybe above all therein—that its strength and authenticity manifest themselves....

In the final analysis, the patience we exercise in the face of life's constant enigmas, by resisting the temptation to defect and resort to simplistic answers, is always our patience with God, who is not "at hand." But what else is faith but this openness in the face of God's hiddenness, the bold "yes" (or at least "yearnful maybe") of our hope in the profound stillness of God's silence, that small but tenacious flame that bursts forth again and again from the ashes of resignation even in the longest, darkest, and coldest of nights? In Christianity there is no way of separating faith and hope—and patience is their common attribute and fruit.³

According to Halík, faith *is* patience.

I think David would agree.

David was not naïve. In Psalm 40, David celebrates the deliverance of God, and he is eager to tell of God's goodness. But he knows that all deliverances on this side of eternity are temporary. He knows that there will be other slimy pits, other bogs, other trials where he will desperately need a sure place to put his feet.

If we read on past verse 11, we see that we are back in the realm of requests for deliverance.

Do not withhold your mercy from me (v. 11).

Be pleased, O Lord, to save me... Come quickly to help me (v. 12).

David knows that patience and longsuffering are not temporary pit stops on the highway of life, but they are essential tools for the whole journey.

What his Psalm tells us is that we live in days when patience and waiting will be part of the furniture of our experience.

We will experience glorious times of deliverance, times when we are dragged up out of the slimy pit, when our tongues are loosed to sing a new song of praise; we will also quite likely experience times when deliverance comes more slowly. Times when God seems a long way away, sometimes for a very long time.

³ Tomáš Halík, *Patience with God* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 201-202.

All of our days are spent in the “long Saturday” between promise and fulfillment. We live with one foot in the door of the world as we believe it ought to be and will one day be, but we are much more familiar with the world as it is, with its ambiguous mixture of joy and suffering, its waste and decay, its harshness and beauty, and its constant reminders that we will not be around forever.

All of our days are waiting days—to be born human is to be born waiting. The only thing in our power is to decide *how* we will wait.

Our worship series is called, “Listening to the Psalms: Wisdom for Living Well.” How will we listen well to Psalm 41?

We need patience to live well. Impatience is nothing if not a desire to control what we cannot control. The wise person knows this, and is continually cultivating the virtue of patience.

Not just a patience that sees us through the ordinary, everyday inconveniences and irritations of life, not even a patience that sees us through the long, dark periods when God seems absent, when we are in the pit, when hope seems only a rumour on a distant horizon that we can barely see.

We need to cultivate a deep patience that acknowledges that we live in an unfinished world that is still in process. A patience that *knows* that there will be deep pits and slimy bogs in this life, but that the God to whom we belong is a solid and secure place to stand.

How do we do this? Well, there are no formulas and there is no magic. The tools for the job are simple ones used by saints down through the ages.

Daily prayer. Surrender (acknowledging what we cannot do). Honesty before God. Practice. Repentance. Stumbling, falling, trying again. Disciplining ourselves to not allow our spiritual temperature to be determined by the pleasantness (or misery!) of our circumstances.

But, of course, we will never fully arrive at our goal. We will never be as patient as we would like to be. We will never bear suffering as hopefully as we ought to. We will never squelch every doubt or fear. We will continue to groan and stumble and slip, even as we take steps and make progress toward being able to say, *I waited patiently for the Lord...*

But the pursuit of the goal is part of what it means to live well. And ultimately, of course, as we saw last week, living well depends upon the settled conviction that God is reliable, faithful, and true even, or *especially*, when we are not. God is the sure foundation, the solid rock upon which to stand.

Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (commenting on Psalm 125):

The person of faith is described in the psalm as one who “cannot be moved, but abides forever.” But I am moved. I am full of faith one day and empty with doubt the next. I wake up one morning full of vitality, rejoicing in the sun; the next day I am gray and dismal, faltering and moody. “Cannot be moved”—nothing could be less true of me. I can be moved by nearly anything: sadness, joy, success, failure. I’m a thermometer and go up and down with the weather....

*All the persons of faith I know are sinners, doubters, uneven performers. **We are secure not because we are sure of ourselves but because we trust that God is sure of us. The opening phrase of the psalm is “those who trust in the LORD”—not those who trust in their performance, in their morals, in their righteousness, in their health, in their pastor, in their doctor, in their president, in their economy, in their nation—“those who trust in the LORD.” Those who decide that God is for us and will make us whole eternally.***⁴

May God grant us the grace, whatever our circumstances, to be able to say, with the psalmist, *I waited patiently for the Lord.*

Amen.



⁴ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*.