

The End of Patience

Isaiah 64:1-12

Patience is a virtue, we're told. Assuming this axiom to be true, then the logical conclusion would be: some of us are not very virtuous, myself included.

As a matter of confession, I admit, I am not a particularly patient driver. I'm not recklessly aggressive on the road, by any means, but I'm also not one who likes to drive any distance at a snail's pace or get stuck in long lines of traffic (many of which form for no apparent reason, at least on I-95). I prefer to arrive at my destination at the earliest reasonable time, even if I am guilty of ignoring the speed limit far more than I should (as I explain to the officers, with my namesakes both Paul and Calvin, I'm predestined to drive by grace, not by law!).

However, a more common test of my patience occurs whenever I'm at a local stoplight and the person in front of the line pays no attention to when the light turns green (this brings out the best in me!). This seems to happen to me once or twice a week, particularly over on Allyn St. They sit there for five or ten seconds attending to their phone or radio or talking to their passengers and then suddenly surge forth as the light changes, leaving the rest of us stuck through another light. I even have a name for this, i.e., "socially irresponsible driving." As I see it, the guilty party is not living up to the terms of the universal social contract implicit to our nation's roads and highways, which requires each driver to pay attention, especially if others are impacted by their actions, or lack thereof. A "socially irresponsible driver" in my book is a road hazard and not someone for whom I should have much patience.

Patience, of course, is more than just an important virtue, it's an absolute necessity for maintaining a semblance of social order and personal peace, road rage notwithstanding. Patience is how we keep our blood pressure in check while dealing with uncooperative, contentious people; it provides some measure of sanity when we cope with adversity or life spins out of control. The root concept is one of longsuffering—being able to endure pain or remain emotionally stable when it's easy to become undone. Patient people, as a rule, are easier to get along with, are more balanced in their perspective, and possess the capability to cope with, if not transcend, stressful situations, at least better than those who are anxious, irritable, or demanding.

At times, though, being patient and tolerant may not be a virtue or, for that matter, even a mercy, particularly when something is morally wrong or unjust and correction is called for. One such example recently are the stunning revelations of sexual misconduct and harassment by leading men in politics, media, entertainment, and the corporate world. Although these come as a surprise, it's been an ugly and chronic reality for many women in the workplace and in daily living. Behind the scenes, boorish, if not criminal, behavior has been tolerated or cultivated by misogynistic men in power—handled, it would seem, with a wink and a nod, instead of being exposed as it is now, which is finally unmasking and holding accountable the culprits and the corporate cultures that covered it up for years.

For the sake of the victims alone, not to mention the workplace culture, the end of patience is, in fact, a good thing. What will come of it? Who knows? Will powerful men learn anything from this? Will women in America finally have hope that genuine and lasting transformation in gender relations, workplace environments, and social cultures will occur,

where females no longer are objectified or subject to such indignity and abuse? Remorse for bad behavior is only the beginning. If it doesn't result in a substantial rewrite of the moral conduct of men in our society, then what will it take? If not public humiliation, then what?

Unfortunately, a lack of shame and remorse is a serial problem in our society until public exposure warrants it. I've heard more than one commentator claim we've needed a moral reckoning like this in our society, including a recognition that none of our lives are ever completely hidden and unaccountable (that's got a lot of men shaking in their boots!). Public humiliation certainly scares many people into better behavior. But public shame is an awful way to have to confront our personal and societal demons.

Maybe, because we're people of mercy, I see it a little differently. Yes, we need moral reckoning—both personal and societal. But I believe it is healthier to possess a sense of knowing that our lives, and our society, are always completely known by the God who will hold us accountable for what we do. Nothing is ever hidden from the divine Spirit. As much as this falls under the category of “religious dogma,” when you think about it, consciousness of God can be a convicting mercy to us. If we cultivate a sense of the presence of God in a genuinely reflective and accountable way, moral reckoning then begins within our own consciences while we still have the opportunity to nip bad behavior in the bud, or correct current conduct and alter choices or, if misdeeds have been done, sense remorse in order to humbly seek forgiveness and justice with those who have been wronged. Public humiliation need not be the only measure of accountability that brings about behavioral change. A deliberate consciousness of God can bring about a more merciful form of moral reckoning within the human

conscience to lead people to deal with their demons and confront the harm they've done before public exposure ruins lives.

Frankly, moral reckoning is a needed mercy. At some point, the end of patience comes—human and divine. When something must change before more damage is done, then for mercy's sake, patience needs to run out to force accountability and transformation to begin. As people of faith, this shouldn't surprise us for this is major theme of redemption within the pages of scripture. It starts with accountability—of moral crisis and complaint.

Our text today from Isaiah 64 gives voice to such a moment of crisis and complaint. You may think it an odd choice for the first Sunday in Advent, given that it doesn't echo Isaiah's customary uplifting, visionary passages we associate with this season. Instead, it's a bitter complaint about how disappointed the returning exiles were with God's absence of action—Jerusalem lay in ruin and their return to their homeland seemed utterly pointless and without purpose.

Yet, as far the prophetic voice was concerned, the devastating destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and subsequent exile to Babylon served as the historic shaming of Israel. Public and historic humiliation was their moral reckoning for generations of corruption, deceit, perversion, and abuse—warned by the prophets that Israel's uncorrected sins would bring about their demise. And it didn't simply end once they were freed from captivity and returned to their native land. The process of redemption didn't end with their remorse; instead, recovering their world included rebuilding a society that was more faithful to the just and righteous standards inherent to their moral law. Confronting that reality is the meaning behind this passage.

In that light, rebuilding Jerusalem and their nation was a metaphor for recreating the moral and spiritual character of their individual and collective lives. But as we can see by these verses, simply being free and willing to change wasn't enough. Everything they knew was in ruins—not unlike many lives in the wake of moral reckoning. Their commitment to do better was only the beginning of their redemption; in truth, it was a long and arduous process of rebuilding their lives and their world, one stone, one life, and one choice at a time. Redemption often came with more pain than inspiration.

Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,
And do not remember iniquity forever...
After all this, will you restrain yourself, O Lord?
Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?

Redemption can be difficult and harsh, but to even have the opportunity to start over—that, in itself, is a mercy. That is both the hardship and the hope of moral reckoning and redemption.

It is only in this context of beginning again that we hear the beloved Advent passages we know so well:

Comfort, comfort ye my people... (Isaiah 40:1)

The people who walked in darkness
Have seen a great light... (Isaiah 9:2)

A shoot shall come up out of the stump of Jesse... (Isaiah 11:1)

Maintain justice, and do what is right,
For soon my salvation will come,
And my deliverance be revealed. (Isaiah 56:1)

In that declaration, patience then takes on an entirely new role in the context of hope. Instead of the end of patience ushering in moral reckoning, patience becomes a part of renewal. While hope is focusing on the vision for what is right, patience is what sustains the human spirit

through the long and difficult process of redemption. Patience is what helps you recover hope, trust, integrity, and decency through every test, setback, and disappointment.

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not yet seen. (Hebrews 11:1)

For in hope we are saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not yet see, we wait for it with patience. (Romans 8:24, 25)

Perhaps to our surprise, Advent is meant to begin in a time of crisis and complaint, where moral reckoning must occur. Hope is born out of the spirit of redemption that first calls us to account to change our ways. It is not cheap grace; it never has been. It doesn't let you off the hook easily with mere feelings of remorse. Thus, it is very costly to our lives, our relationships, our behavioral patterns, and our souls. It's a necessary mercy which comes our way whenever we face the end of patience. And, in the end, that's what makes patience, truly, a virtue.

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