

“Fruit of the Spirit: Patience”

Genesis 18: 1-15

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A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Taylor

Today I am beginning a series of sermons on the fruits of the Spirit. Jesus promised his disciples, and you and me today, that he would send the Holy Spirit to us to guide, inspire, challenge, unite, comfort and provide strength for the living of these days in his physical absence. We recognize the Holy Spirit among us when it is manifested, according to the Apostle Paul, by the Spirit’s fruits. He then identifies the fruit of the Holy Spirit in his letter to the Galatian people: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control.” This morning I invite us to consider patience. In scripture patience is often used to characterize God’s relationship with us; it means forbearance and long suffering. It describes a person who has the power to exercise revenge or punishment but instead exercises restraint. Imagine that – exercising restraint and patience!

When the word is used to characterize human beings, it implies an ability to bear up under difficult circumstances with hopeful fortitude. Patience actively resists weariness and defeat; it is a willingness to wait and see what God has in store for us. Hope and faith are crucial elements of patience. Patience trusts that with God all things are possible.

I have to admit that the best definition of patience which I ever heard came from my grandson Jacob. Our family always spends a week together over the Fourth of July

and several years ago, when Jacob was about 5 or 6 years old, we were at the beach. As any young child is, he was excited about getting down to the ocean to swim. The adults in the house kept telling him to have patience! I stopped what I was doing; probably getting water and snacks together for the day; and I asked him, “Jacob, do you know what patience means?” He rolled his eyes and with a most annoyed tone of voice replied, “Nana, it means you stand still and listen.” Great definition. There are times in our lives when we need the kind of patience which stands still and listens for God in our lives. It is not a passive waiting but a hopeful trust in God to accomplish his will in our lives.

As I have thought about the people of the Bible who demonstrate patience, Abraham comes to mind. Let’s hear his story.

Prayer for Understanding

Startle us, O God, with your truth and your lively, life-giving presence.
Come to us this day, this morning, this time together and touch our hearts with your grace. Strengthen our spirits with your love in Jesus Christ, which come to us in surprising ways. And in hearing your truth, give us the courage to expand our horizons and embrace the new life you offer.
Amen.

We are first introduced to Abraham in chapter 12 of the Old Testament book of Genesis. God taps Abram on the shoulder and tells him to move from his homeland, from all that is familiar, to a land which God promises to show him. Embrace change! “Now the Lord said to Abram: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s

house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” God commands Abram to begin a life long journey and a relationship of trust and patience with God. In Genesis 17, God speaks to Abram again when he ninety-nine years old: “I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you and will make you exceedingly numerous.” Then Abram fell on his face; and God continues: “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her and she shall give rise to nations.” Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”

Now fast forward many years.

Read Genesis 18

Abraham and Sarah are, by this time, getting on in years. They are old, old and accustomed to a nomadic way of living. They are at a time of life when, to put it delicately, you don’t “buy green bananas” as my father liked to say, or make long-range plans. It is time to downsize, sell the house, get rid of your stuff, and move to a retirement home. It’s not a time to launch an adventure or start something new. As a matter of fact, the last thing in the world you would contemplate, the most outrageous

thought you could think of, is a pregnancy, a baby. They vaguely remembered God's promise to make them fruitful and the parents of an entire nation, but they are way beyond that now.

Then one day, three strangers appear in the heat of midday. Abraham is sitting in the shade at the opening of his tent. Sarah is inside. According to nomadic custom, Abraham welcomes the strangers, offers hospitality, and asks Sara to prepare a meal. The strangers share a meal with Abraham and visit for a while.

“By the way, where is Sarah?” one of the strangers asks. And then, out of the clear blue, one of the strangers announces to Abraham, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” Crazy talk. Impossible, right? Sarah, inside the tent, preparing the food, is eavesdropping on their conversation. She explodes in laughter when there is absurd talk of a new born baby. The stranger hears the laughter and asks, “Why is Sarah laughing? Is anything too wonderful/impossible for the Lord?”

Fast forward: Sure enough, Sarah conceives, gives birth to a child, a son. They name him Isaac, which means “laughter.” Sarah laughs again. It's a different laughter now – laughter at the surprising, unpredictable, unlikely, delightful grace of God. She says, “God has brought laughter for me.”

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says this is the foundational biblical story because of how God is experienced. God is not a remote god, as were the pagan gods, residing somewhere in the sky/out there, but God chooses to come to us and journey with us. God shows up in the barren lives of two old people; shows up with the promise of life and hope. The overwhelming and always relevant question here – “Is

anything too wonderful for the Lord?” – is at the heart of what it means to have faith.

(And patience to wait for God to fulfill God’s promises to us.)

If the answer to the question is “Yes, some things are too difficult for God,” then God is not God, and we have decided to live in a closed universe where everything is stable, reliable, and hopeless and where the end of the story is death. If the answer is “No, nothing is too wonderful for God: nothing is impossible for God“, you have taken the leap of faith and decided to live in a world full of possibility, hopefulness, a world full of life, a world full of surprise.

Contrary to conventional modern wisdom, faith is not about knowing everything there is to know about God. It is knowing that there is plenty about God that we don’t know. Faith is not certainty. Faith is acknowledging that God will not be reduced to the limits of human understanding. God will be God, and there will always be surprise. “God will make a way where there is no way,” Martin Luther King Jr., used to say. God will make a way through the sea. God will bring freedom out of oppression, justice out of injustice, life out of death, new life out of the most barren of situations. Its not that God will do everything we ask, give us whatever we think we want, as the prosperity gospel preachers promise. It is that God is God and God will do God’s will and it will be a delightful surprise when it happens. It is God who comes to us when we have given up, when we have concluded that God has forgotten us, when our backs are against the wall and our hearts are full of fear. God comes quietly, steadily, to be with us, to bind up our wounds, to strengthen our hearts and arms and legs.

Is there anything too wonderful or impossible for our God? Have the kind of patience which stands on faith, hope and love.

I have a patriotic story about Benjamin Franklin, one of the signers of our Declaration of Independence and one of our founding fathers. Franklin was interested in observing, from a scientific perspective, the natural world – an interest which sparked the creation of the Poor Richard’s Almanac. Of particular interest to Franklin were solar eclipses. Earlier generations in Europe considered such celestial events through the lens of the occult. By contrast, Franklin was suspicious when supernatural readings were believed to be the cause of natural events.

The story is told, and I know I used it recently but I love it and I am reminded of it again, it is about how the founding fathers were all gathered in Philadelphia to write and sign the Declaration of Independence. They were close to completing their task, when on that day there occurred, at mid-day, a total eclipse of the sun. Some of the representatives, believing the end times were upon them, jumped from their seats and rushed for the door, to go and saddle their horses to ride home. Reactive, knee-jerk response born of a lack of understanding in full. Benjamin Franklin, eloquent speaker that he was, rose to speak. He commanded that lanterns and candles be brought into the hall, “for if it was the end of the world,” he said, “he would rather be caught engaged in the work God set before him.” Patience: forbearance in the midst of difficult situations, waiting for God to reveal God’s purposes for our lives, perhaps listening instead of being quick to talk, trusting that with God all things are possible. A reminder that when we are ready and jump on our horses to speed home, we might want to take a deep breath and stand still and listen for God’s presence in our lives and in the world.