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Psalm

## **PATIENCE IS MORE THAN A VIRTUE**

This beautiful psalm holds a lesson that I need to hear right now, and I suspect that many of you need to hear also. We know what is going to happen in the next election, and we know that many of the things we have fought for, and longed for, will not occur — at least not on our time schedule. Our clocks are not God's clocks, even on our longest days, and faith is not a deal we make with the divine, but a radical trust we place in God to have the last word.

Scholars believe that it was written by an older person, not necessarily David, who is instructing those who may believe that patience is not really a virtue after all, and that the idea that God's vindication comes ultimately to those who are righteous is an illusion. They are beginning to doubt that being good really pays off, but perhaps that is because they expect the payoff to be on their terms, and when they expect it.

The phrase "do not fret" is repeated several times, and which one of us can't relate to this — whether we are fretting over a personal issue, an issue where we work, an issue related to our health, an issue about the future and whether we can really make it better for our children. We add up the numbers and the numbers don't look good.

The gap just keeps growing between rich and poor that shows no sign of being challenged or reversed. The most powerful people on the planet, Mr. and Mrs. Corporation, are set to buy even more of our democracy. More of our friends and neighbors are slipping into poverty. We have turned our anger against immigrants and Muslims and when asked if people still believe in the American Dream, over half, for the first time ever, say they do not.

Needless to say, we are fretting. We are sometime envious of wrongdoers, and it would appear that they are not fading like the grass or withering like the green herb. This psalm takes its power from the familiar lament: “How long oh Lord, how long, shall the wicked prosper?” These days if you rob a bank from the outside, you get 20 years to life. If you own it and rob it from the inside, you’ll get a government bailout.

If you can afford the right lawyer, you can literally get away with murder, as O. J. Simpson did, but if you are poor, you can be wrongly convicted and spend your life behind bars, or even be executed, for a crime you didn’t commit. We lost in Iraq and we will lose in Afganistan, and if we don’t change course soon we will be bankrupt. And then the psalmist says, “Robin, refrain from anger, and forsake wrath.”

Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him; do not fret over those who prosper in their way, over those who carry out evil devices. Do not fret — it only leads to evil. For the wicked shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.

Really? Does that include my Palestinian sisters and brothers, who are not only cut off from the land of their ancestors, but who watch daily as their occupiers, great lovers of David, bulldoze their homes and replace them with their own. So they should be patient too? What happens when the righteous behave like the wicked?

Commit your way to the LORD, says the psalmist, trust in him, and he will act. He will make your vindication shine like the light, and the justice of your cause like the noonday.

Really, because it’s almost noon. What happens when you think you are running out of time? What happens when there are no jobs left because everything has been outsourced? What happens when the water runs out? What happens when the food chain breaks down? What happens when life becomes impossible on a mortally wounded planet?

Can’t we be like Jesus and snap? Go into the Temple of our “Corpocracy” and start turning over the tables and cutting up our credit cards? Isn’t the line between patience and apathy rather thin? If we are sweet and patient like good little Christian girls and boys, won’t the wrongdoers assume that they have a free pass?

In the very next verse, this older, wiser man says “Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look diligently for their place, they will not

be there. But the meek shall inherit the land (see where Jesus got this idea), and [the meek will] delight themselves in abundant prosperity.

Really? The wicked are not only not going to triumph, they are going to disappear? When? Could you just give me a rough idea? Nothing too precise, just say, in which millennium? This is the lament of the ages: “How long, oh Lord, how long shall the wicked prosper?”

My mother used to tell me that patience was a virtue. But now I realize that it is something much more than that. Patience is a deep, mysterious, inexplicable component of faith. Because faith is not about what you believe. It is a radical form of trust — for the long haul — for the distant future — for generations yet unborn.

Don't get me wrong. I do not believe that this means that to be a faithful person is to be a person who never takes action to correct injustice. Or that to be patient means that one must be passive. Change has come when faithful people acted, and so we will continue to act for the cause of justice. But what can easily happen is that cynicism sets in because we don't think what we have done has changed anything. Even change itself, when it announces its own arrival, can disappoint us.

I believe that a faithful person is both willing to act in the present to address injustice, and also trust God in a time beyond our own to make the seed we plant blossom. Can I prove this? Of course not. Anything you can prove requires no faith. Have people always thought that they were living in a time when the curtain was falling — absolutely. Has it fallen?

The psalmist goes on to say, “The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows to bring down the poor and needy, to kill those who walk uprightly; their sword shall enter their own heart, and their bows shall be broken.”

If you listen closely you heard it. The verdict of faith is that evil is ultimately self-defeating. It destroys itself. But in the meantime, there is a lot of collateral damage.

I just returned from two days with my sidekick Chris Moore, meeting with the little Kansas Oklahoma Conference of the UCC — and I do mean little. It has contracted, as all mainline denominations have, from 109 churches when I began my tenure here, to 74 churches today, only 10 of which are big enough to afford one full-time minister. Most of the churches in our conference are tiny and dying.

They mostly exist in survival mode, and so their chances of survival diminish with every passing day. The equation of the gospel is pure paradox; you lose your life in order to find it. You waste your love and it is wasted on you in return—sometimes beyond your deserving. You speak truth to power and trust that, as Dr. King said, the arc or history is long, but it bends toward justice.

Two high holy days occur simultaneously this weekend. OU/Texas weekend and World Communion Sunday. You don't have to guess which one got the most press. Someone asked me at the conference meeting how Mayflower does communion. I said, "We do it at the homeless shelter, and our bread is fried chicken; our wine is red punch; our benediction is pecan pie (please take just one on your first trip through).

"You serve communion in a homeless shelter?" came the puzzled response. Yes, that's our real communion. Well, then what do you do in church? I thought about that for a moment, and said, a "re-enactment."

Just about everything about this church puzzles people—but in a very compelling way. They don't understand how we do what we do, and sometimes, frankly, neither do I, neither does Chris. But we are eternally thankful to 363, Mobil Meals, Whiz Kids, Rebuilding Together, Mayflower's Alberque, the House of Love in Nicaragua, the extraordinary generosity that makes our Benevolence Board budget higher than the operating budget of many churches, the Taft middle school project, the Model Outreach Program to Autistic children, Compassionate Friends, Sierra Club, the Jesus Seminar on the Road, community organizing, the blood drives, health and wellness — it goes on and on.

We go on and on, planting seeds for trees under whose shade branches we will never sit. We get discouraged, but we do not give up. And we have a word for that. We call it faith.

Amen.