

## THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

*James 5:7-11*

### 3 P's for Advent

1. Be patient for Christ's coming
2. Don't pass judgment on each other while you wait
3. Persevere, knowing the Lord's purpose

“Are we there yet?” “Are we there yet?” You may be familiar with that refrain, repeated *ad nauseam* on long family trips. For Tricia and I, the question we hear is “Gramma house?” Maggie has it in her mind where she should be going and will ask 50 times, regardless of our answer or the circumstances.

Today we enter our third week of the Advent season and may be tempted to ask, “Are we there yet?” “Is Christ coming now?” Like Maggie, we have an idea what we want to happen and we can't get it off our mind. “Are we there yet?” St. James answers today like a father more patient than myself, “Be patient for Christ's coming. Don't pass judgment on each other while you wait. Persevere, knowing the Lord's purpose.”

Someone once called patience “the beggars virtue” (Philip Massinger). A beggar has no choice of when he will get a handout. He waits and waits until some kind soul comes along. He has no control. Sure, he can try to look pathetic and can come up with creative lines to win compassion, but, ultimately, his fate lies with the philanthropist. As Luther commented just before his death, “We are all beggars.” We approach God as men, women, and children with nothing to offer Him. Sure, we can do our best to look pathetic, or come up with creative lines, but ultimately His decision to show kindness lies entirely in Himself. We see that displayed in a Bethlehem manger. When we could not ascend to heaven, God descended to us and made us what we could not be on our own: His very brothers and sisters, His sons and daughters.

We have heard over and over this Advent season that our Lord Jesus is coming. We have repeatedly prayed: “Come, Lord Jesus, come!” Our Lord's coming is at hand, as it has been since He ascended into heaven. The only reason He has waited this long is to show as much mercy as possible to as many as possible. St. Peter writes, “*But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”* Have we started to live like our Lord's delay in returning was an excuse for sin and not an exhibition of His mercy? Do we ask, “What if Jesus returned now?” Are we scared or ashamed of what He might find and how He might find us? I pray we have, but I am sure at times we have not. But, that is why we are beggars, after all—because we fall short of our Lord's standards. We are always in the process of begging our Lord's undeserved favor, and, for that reason, we have no place passing judgment on each other.

In *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, an account is told of a respected hermit who went to a communal meeting intended to address the sins of fellow monk. When he got there and heard the brothers talking about the fallen man, he left and got two bags. He filled one with a lot of sand and put it on his back. He put a few grains in the other, and wore it in front of him. The younger brothers asked him why he did this. He replied, “The bag in the back is my own sins. The bag in the front is the sins of this brother. I am turning my back from my many trespasses, not considering them, so that I can judge the faults of this brother.” They then realized their hypocrisy and repented. Which bag have you been wearing in front: your sins or the sins of your brothers and sisters?

Maybe it shouldn't, but it simply astounds me how often as a pastor I hear from people about the sins of others. I have numerous times heard about how the main problem with church is there are too many sinners and hypocrites. Well, quite frankly, there is always room for one more. The perfect need not enter here. We are a hospital for sinners, not a showroom for saints, and, unless you were born of a virgin and died for the sins of the world, you need Christ's divine medicine as much as anyone else, even if your symptoms seem less obvious. Hidden, internal sickness is almost always more deadly than the external, obvious kind. And, honestly, I really don't understand what some people want us to do anyways, bring each person accused of sin to the front and flog them? Then, right after that, we could join to pray, *"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."* That wouldn't be the height of hypocrisy! Maybe we should just scratch that word "Evangelical" off our church sign, because "Evangelical" means that the gospel predominates here. Does it?

Our Lord has freely and undeservedly forgiven your every sin, and not just the sins you are willing to admit in front of others. He has forgiven the sins of your youth, the sins you've worked so hard to hide from your family, the sins you remember when you can't sleep. Consider who you are, consider what you've done, and then pass judgment on your brothers and sisters. Yes, as Christians, we should and indeed must call sin "sin" and condemn it when we come upon it, but we must not judge the one who has committed it with a harsher measure than we use to judge ourselves. There are different earthly consequences for sins, but there are no levels of sins in God's eyes. Do not pass judgment on each other, as if others' sins are more damnable than yours, or as if you too could not fall from grace, because if you do, it is evidence that you yourself do not yet understand how God has forgiven you. As is usual, Scripture can say it more succinctly than I can: *"Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!"*

God has forgiven you. That is an objective fact. You can reject it, but it is nevertheless true. Christ died for the sins of the world, not just for the sins of believers. You are forgiven. Turn from your sin and believe it. Though you are nothing more than a beggar, Christ has made you an heir to the greatest inheritance of all. By Baptism, you have become a child of the Heavenly Father. What is the Father's is now yours by faith. You have God's check, signed and dated at the font, and you will soon cash it when its endorser comes, that is, unless you throw it away. With this in mind, St. James' urges us to persevere.

He writes, *"As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy."* The Lord never acts without purpose, but rather, when He delays, He delays for the very people who are growing impatient with Him. Charles Spurgeon once said, *"By perseverance the snail reached the ark."* We too may think at times that we are crawling, and crawling too slowly at that, but our salvation is near, and it will come at the time our Lord has appointed. St. James gives the example of Job, who lost everything and waited in absolute impoverishment for the Lord's assistance. It seemed as though the Lord had forsaken him, and his closest friends told him just that, yet when God's appointed time came, Job was rewarded beyond anything he had ever known before. *"The Lord is full of compassion and mercy."* There is a purpose behind His plans, and what He is full of guides His purpose. Wait, because compassion and mercy are waiting for you. Remember St. James' 3 P's for Advent. Be patient for Christ's coming. Don't pass judgment on each other while you wait. Persevere, knowing the Lord's good purpose. Amen.