***TRYING GOD’S PATIENCE***

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Texts: Isaiah 5:1-7 and Romans 11:17-24

How long, O Lord, how long! That is the frequent cry of the psalmist and of God’s people in the midst of whatever trying circumstance they find themselves. How long must this difficulty continue? How long must I endure this pain? How long until we find some relief? Those frustrated cries echo across the generations; some of them start at a very early age.

*“Dear God,”* writes young Victor. *“If you know so much how come you never*

*made the river big enough for all the water and our house got flooded and now we got to move.”*

“*Dear God,”* writes young Rose. *“Why can’t you even keep it from raining on*

*Saturday all the time.”*

*“Dear God,”* writes young Lewis. “*I wrote you before. Do you remember?*

*Well I did what I promised. But you did not send me the horse yet. What about it?”*[[1]](#endnote-1)

What about it, Lord? How long must we put up with disappointment or disaster or some awful disease before you step in and make things right? How long?

Perhaps some of those same cries have escaped your lips from time to time. They are cries that must be familiar to God’s ears. But I do wonder whether such exasperated cries or sighs do not also escape divine lips, perhaps more often than they do from the lips of God’s people. How often does God wonder:

How long until they do what I ask them to do?

How long until they stop killing and tormenting one another?

How long until they realize most of their problems are of their own making?

How long until they remember me, the one who created them?

How long until they let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like

an ever-flowing stream – to paraphrase Amos from last week?

How long will they try my patience?

If we think we have it tough putting up with the trials and tribulations of life, the frustrations we experience day to day with each other, and the seemingly unrealistic expectations God has for us, imagine how much tougher it must be for God!

There are those who will argue that God has no room to complain since the Lord could have created us differently – perhaps denying us free will with which to make sinful decisions or rebooting the whole human project when we go too far astray as God almost did with the flood in the Noah story. But for whatever reason, God seems to think that creating us as God did in all our glorious diversity, granting us free will to make our own lousy decisions, promising to love us without end, and offering guidance on how to live in harmony with one another with all the blessings of life at our fingertips would be enough. Yet day after day after day we prove God wrong again and again and again!

Those words from the prophet Isaiah that we heard a moment ago give voice to divine frustration with God’s people, and it should be enough to give us pause to consider how much we really want to continue to try God’s patience! The prophecy is cast in the form of a love song that is really an indictment of Israel in the form of a parable about a vineyard.

*My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it…*

So begins the love-song which is the parable. Even good land requires hard work to become a garden. The owner of the vineyard does the backbreaking work of clearing stones, planting choice vines, and building a tower to guard the vineyard from thieves, both human and animal, who would steal the fruits of his labors. He carves a vat out of rock, hard work but necessary for making the fine wine which he hopes to get from his choice grapes. He does all that he can do to make this vineyard productive, not just in the short term, but for years to come. Yet his efforts prove fruitless (pun intended), for the vineyard yields wild grapes – literally in the Hebrew, “worthless, stinking things” that are good for nothing.

The vineyard owner’s frustration is understandable; his exhaustive efforts have gone unrewarded through no fault of his own. There was nothing more he could have done and no explanation for the crop’s failure. All the elements for success were there: a fertile hill, choice vines, hard work. Yet in the end there were only those stinking wild grapes. So, the vineyard owner vows to cut his losses and tear down the vineyard wall, for the fruit is not worth protecting. He will abandon the choice vines and cease to care for them, for they have proved worthless. The vineyard will become a wasteland of briers and thorns, and to assure its destruction, the vineyard owner commands no rain to fall upon it.

Now I know a lot of good farmers and vineyard owners, but even the best of them cannot order the clouds to shower raindrops or withhold them. That power lies alone with the Lord. So, when the vineyard owner commands the clouds to withhold their rain, we know who the vineyard owner is – not just a good farmer with bad luck, but the Lord God Almighty who alone rules the rains. The vineyard is the Lord’s, and the vines are God’s people who have produced nothing but stinking wild grapes. The Lord expected more! The Lord expected justice, but found violence and bloodshed; the Lord expected righteousness, but instead heard cries of distress. The fruits of justice and righteousness were nowhere to be found in the Lord’s vineyard; in their place were the stinking fruit of violence and conflict and agony. Those who heard the song were the worthless grapes in the vineyard of Israel who had proved fruitless despite the Lord’s best efforts, those who stood on the doorstep of exile.

In the voice of that vineyard owner is the divine exasperation of a God who has given everything necessary for the people to thrive – blessings galore and guidance for righteous living from the Law and prophets. Yet instead of grateful cries of “Alleluia!” from the throats of joyful, loving, prosperous, faithful people, the Lord hears cries of “how long!” from selfish, violent, unfaithful people.

Instead of peace there is discord,

instead of forgiveness – judgment,

instead of gratitude – greed,

instead of self-giving – self-centeredness,

instead of love – hate,

instead of fruitful lives – worthless lives.

Dare we say that ***we*** are any better than those Israelites to whom Isaiah was speaking?

Like Judah, we are choice vines, planted and nurtured by the Lord in fertile fields of faith. Our roots spring from the gentle work of a green-thumbed God who has provided all things for us to flourish and be fruitful, a God who sent Jesus to save us from our sins and to show us what faithfulness should look like. But look around – there is a lot of stinking fruit in our corner of the vineyard. There is violence and abusive name-calling; racism, xenophobia, and tribalism that deny the beauty of the diversity in which God created us; greed and gluttony that hoard excesses while children starve and go homeless; addictions to escape the reality of living; an unhealthy love for guns and wealth to secure our futures; abuse of the earth for selfish purposes; and denial of the power of Christ’s commandment to love God and neighbor as an ethic for living in peace with one another.

God planted us here to be fruitful in a vineyard that would yield justice and righteousness in abundance, and look what we have produced! Is there any wonder that God is frustrated and even angry from to time at what worthless, stinking fruit we have produced! And before you judge all the others for those problems, consider: How fruitful have you been? With all that God has done for you, with all the care God has provided, what have you produced – good fruits which God can use and enjoy or stinking fruit which is worthless to the Lord?

Were that the last word, then we might well head home with a sense of impending doom hanging over our heads, but that is not God’s way. Even in the face of judgment and divine disappointment, the Lord offers a hopeful word, an encouraging word to sustain us. For while Isaiah offers this divine indictment, he also speaks of that day of peace when the wolf and lamb will lie down together, and Isaiah tells of the suffering servant of the Lord who will redeem them. In that passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans we read this morning, we hear God’s welcome of the Gentiles into the family of God – the wild shoot grafted into the rich root of the olive tree of faith, embracing those who had been outcasts. But Paul also cautions the faithful not to judge those who have fallen away, for God might graft back into the righteous root the branches which were broken off. In that promise and possibility there is grace and hope for redemption with the assurance that God does not give up on any of us, ever – God perseveres.

As frustrated as God may get with us, God still loves us, still cares for us, still hopes for us to become productive vines in this vineyard of the Lord. To that end, Jesus comes saying, “I am the vine. You are the branches.” As fruitless as we may have been, he offers a way for us to become fruitful, and in so doing to be more fully the people God created us to be. Instead of abandoning the vineyard, God gives us a new root into which to be grafted – the root of Jesse who is Jesus Christ – a root from which we can draw strength and perhaps yet prove fruitful to God. We cannot do that alone; we’ve tried and failed. But by drawing on the strength of that vine who is Christ, and following his example by living as he calls us to live and loving as he calls us to love, we may yet bear good fruit and lead God, not to sigh, “How long!” but to say, “Well done!” Amen

1. *Children’s Letters to God* compiled by Eric Marshall and Stuart Hample, PB Special:1966 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)