

# SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

## THE CURE FOR IMPATIENCE

Numbers 21: 4-9

This past Friday I had to take our Civic in for the yearly state vehicle inspection at 8 o'clock in the morning. Being a car that was only purchased one year ago, the inspection was completed in less than 30 minutes, putting me back on the road by 8:30. Well, as most of you know better than I, that is in the teeth of the Forest Avenue office park rush hour. Seeing the build up of traffic, I decided to continue on Glenside in order to return to the church by Three Chopt. As I was approaching the intersection of Glenside and Forest, I heard a horn sound behind me. I looked into my rear view mirror just in time to see the suburban housewife-looking driver giving the universal sign of displeasure to the driver in the turning lane. As we continued through the intersection, she wheeled her SUV onto Forest thereby avoiding the denied turning lane entirely and making it clear that the object of her disdain had had the temerity to be in the way of her progress. I was left to hope they were heading for different office buildings and parking lots.

With the exception of the gesture (I hope), we have all been there. We are impatient by nature and our impatience often results in sinful behavior. Most, or more accurately, all of us are driven by impatience which is the root of what St. Paul terms, *the passions of our flesh* (Ephesians 2:3).

In the Garden, our first ancestors, Adam and Eve, fell for the temptation to get out ahead of God. There was only one thing in the garden forbidden to them and that was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. God being the God of Purpose most likely put that tree there for some reason other than as a temptation to humankind. Just as after surgery involving general anesthetic, the patient is forbidden to have anything but clear fluids until the effects of the anesthetic wears off, one interpretation of the prohibition in the garden is that Adam and Eve were not yet ready to handle such knowledge properly. Subsequent human history would seem to bear that out. In addition, when Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, Satan tempts Jesus to by pass the cross and be who he really is supposed to be, and in his humanity would ultimately become. The temptation in both cases is to do now what God in his infinite wisdom and perfect will has planned for you later.

The story of the Exodus is another sad chapter in the chronicles of human impatience. It is a story that reads like a caricature of the worst family trip ever. It is all recorded there in unmistakable black and white.

“Moses, you're lost; just admit it, you don't know where you're going.”

“Moses, we're thirsty.”

“Moses, if we don't get there soon we're going to die.”

“Moses, we wish we had stayed home.”

“Moses, why did you force us to go on this trip?”

“Moses, why not stop there, it looks nice enough?”

“Moses, you’re incompetent. We need a new leader who knows what he’s doing.”

Before the serpents ever physically appeared among Israel in the wilderness, the people had been bitten by the Serpent in the Garden. It was the poison of impatience that was driving them to sin.

The temptations leading to impatience that we encounter are legion. Our expectations of others cause us to be impatient when they do not perform as we would have them perform. We lead extremely busy lives which cause us react impatiently when others move too slowly or take up too much of our time. When we need something or someone and are blocked by inaccessibility our convenience is compromised and we become impatient. As consumers we have ever increasing appetites which when denied causes impatience. Even when we are sick, although we are called patients, we are extremely impatient about being restored to health and resuming the life we now see as so attractive. There is one thing that is consistent among all these temptations to impatience. That one thing is me. The focus of all these circumstances is the self. I am not thinking of God’s perfect plan and the future fulfillment of his promises, I am thinking about my present situation. I am not thinking about God or my neighbor, I am thinking only about myself.

In the wilderness the people were told to look upon the serpent on the staff. In the Gospel, Jesus tells us that “*...just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life*” (John 3:14-15). In dealing with our impatience we always seem to forget that incorporated in the terms of the curse in Genesis chapter 3 (v.15) is the promise that the heel of the son will crush the head of the serpent.

One of the most vivid images of the fulfillment of that promise comes in the opening scene of Mel Gibson’s movie, “The Passion of the Christ.” Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane praying in agony. It is obviously the “opportune time” for the return of Satan as recorded in the temptation story from Luke (4:13). As Jesus continues to pray, Satan whispers doubt about God’s plan and Jesus’ being able to complete it with success. Jesus is now prostrate in the dust wrestling with what he must face. Slowly a snake materialized from Satan and crawls down his body and onto the ground. The venomous snake slithers toward Jesus who appears to be unaware of its presence. As the snake readies itself to strike, Jesus, looking like he is lifting a diesel locomotive pushes himself first to his knees and then tortuously rises to his feet. He then looks down at the snake, raises one foot and brings his heel crashing down on the head of the snake. What we see in the garden scene informs the rest of the script. Jesus patiently suffers under the weight of our sins, resists an early escape, and successfully crushes the ultimate power of Satan – the lie.

Jesus, and him crucified, is the cure for our impatience. Jesus is our hope. Through Jesus we have both what we need now and the promise of having it more perfectly in the future. *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen* (Hebrews 11:1). Things that are hoped for but as yet remain unseen reside in the future.

We have the assurance of those things through our trust in the one who has promised them. And our trust is manifested through the patience with which we await them. Surely Jesus is the cure for our impatience. But we can only see that if we take our eyes off our selves and put them on Jesus.

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus...*

*O soul, are you weary and troubled?  
No light in the darkness you see?  
There's light for a look at the Savior,  
And life more abundant and free!*

*His word shall not fail you He promised;  
Believe Him, and all will be well;  
Then go to a world that is dying,  
His perfect salvation to tell!*

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus...*

Helen H. Lemmel

Let us pray.

Dear Lord, you died on the cross for our sins, which you patiently bore on our behalf. As we have been bitten by the serpent and have been poisoned by impatience, we give you thanks that you have been lifted high so we might gaze upon the hope that is in you and be delivered. We are so infected that we cannot lift our heads except to wail of our affliction. Lord Jesus, lift our eyes for us that we might look into your glorious face and know your salvation. Heal us so that we might live into the hope that is you in perfect faith. Amen.

*Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on March 23, 2009, the Fourth Sunday in Lent.*