

## Patient Expectation

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Putting Flesh on the Bones of Faith

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The title for today's sermon, "Patient Expectation" comes from one of the opening monologues from William Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar." This monologue was drilled into my head in acting classes as a young man. In the same way that many people can remember their very first locker combination at school, or the phone number of their first best friend, yet can't remember what we had for dinner last night, THIS monologue will probably be rattling around in my head when I am (hopefully) 87 years old. The actual line is "who wait in patient expectation to see great Pompey pass the streets of Rome," but that has nothing to do with today's sermon. To tell you the truth, I just like the ring to it. Patient expectation. In Billy the Bard's famous way, he captures the poetry of the English language and thrusts a tangible, imaginable feeling upon the hearer with two simple words. Patient expectation. In these two words, Shakespeare has also captured an appropriate and thoughtful image for those of us who are pilgrims on the road of faith. These words could easily have been uttered to the earliest disciples, or whispered to the desert fathers and mothers who search and seek the benevolent faith of God. In the same way we can say them to one another in the chairs beside us as words of faith and encouragement as we attempt yet again to put flesh on the bones of our faith during this Lenten season.

I can still remember the day my acting teacher in college said to us that it takes 20 years to make a good actor. 20 years! What then, was the point, we star starved young thespians uttered to each other! But in many ways she was right. She uttered to us a prophetic prediction of Malcolm Gladwell's Outliers, which claims that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to become truly successful at any one thing. So if that is the case, if it takes 10,000 hours for us spiritual pilgrims to achieve any form of enlightenment or revelation, then we'd better get crackin'. That means that each of you, if this one hour of worship is YOUR time of spiritual practice, if you come to worship every Sunday then by the time your 192 years old, you too can achieve spiritual fulfillment!

That is assuming that this one hour a week is the one time that you practice your spirituality. And I know that is not the case. Our faith life is woven into the fabric of our daily existence. It is spiritual discernment we engage in when we struggle with whether or not to take on that big new project at work. The discerning pilgrim is the young schoolteacher who struggles with how to teach her students when they really need a healthy, hearty breakfast. The discerning pilgrim is the mayoral candidate who takes a breath and a pause when she is asked how many meals a church can feed the homeless. Each of us is a discerning pilgrim a hundred times a day when we are faced with simple little questions of character that demand a response. How will you react to the grocery bag man? How will you react to the television handicapped child? How will you react?

Today I hope to offer you some help as you set about your own spiritual discernment; that is a time of intentional process and practice, where we, as individuals and as a community, ask ourselves the challenging questions that rattle around in our hearts with regards to our

thoughts, our actions, and our relationship of those thoughts and actions with our Creator. And the season of Lent is a great time to do that.

With Lent we have a set timeline and season of the church, where everything in your spiritual community CAN conspire with you to let this be a time of practice and discernment. For those of you who have been wishing to get your hands dirty in your spiritual garden, there is no better time than the present to start that process, or, if you've already started, there is no better time to go ahead and dig a little deeper. Here's why. 1. There is a set time frame. 2. There are programs in place, besides our regularly scheduled Sunday morning worship, where you can "Practice" your faith. Have you tried our Wednesday night Taize services yet? If so, see you there! If not, give it a go, see what bubbles up for you. And 3. Not only is there a set ending, but that ending is a happy one, with resurrection, the Hallelujah chorus and, of course, lots of chocolate.

So what does it take to be a discerning spiritual pilgrim on the path of faith? Well let's begin with our first scripture passage today. Hebrews 11:1 "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Strong words here from the letter to the Hebrews.

That word "assurance" brings to mind things like; confidence, certainty, strong belief. And of course, if we are entering into a time of discernment and questioning, one would think that ASSURANCE is the LAST thing we might have. But I would suggest that assurance in the grace and love, or at least the presence of God is a pretty necessary place to start. And it is, after all, the assurance of things HOPED for, which actually gives us a little wiggle room. That "hoped for" component is, after all, what a time of intentional practice is all about. We hope for a brighter day, we hope for a healthy and happy baby, we hope for a new job that fulfills and provides. The ASSURANCE of things hoped for implies a hopeful confidence in the path. A belief in better days. As the performance troupe sang to us this morning, "I know that I am glory bound."

Often, I fear, we make it more difficult on ourselves than we need to. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen. Two things: hope and confidence. No more wishy-washy self doubt.

Our next scripture passage is one of my favorites; and I'll bet it will be for you, too. It comes from Paul's letter to the Romans, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, that you might discern what is the will of God." This has all sorts of good, juicy UCG type tid-bits in it for all of us. Do not be conformed to this world? That could be the UCG motto! Non-Conformists, UNITE! Non-conformity is worn like a badge of honor in this place, which rejoices in a joyful apology so frequently uttered to first visitors that proclaims, "It's not like this every Sunday."

All kidding aside, Paul's call to not be conformed to the world, but to find instead a transformative approach to a world in pain is no simple feat. To name the demons in our midst, the demons that attempt to dictate what is good and right and noble in our world is the battle that each of us wages every day. And as Larry spoke about last week, to see the demons in our

midst (that are in fact those places inside ourselves that are holding us back from the wholeness that we seek in our lives), to name them requires the hard work of critical self reflection and recognition, and, once named (accused—called out), we can begin the transformative work of exorcising them from within. Played in reverse, to discern what God has in mind for us, we must first release the hold we have on the world of the common, and see and proclaim the world of the uncommon.

It's tough. The word of hope is hardly heard on the evening news or in the newspapers. The world of faith is frequently decried and defined in terms of extremist acts and obscene rhetoric. The face of God is hidden away behind masks of hate and misunderstanding, and any strong stance for justice for all has appeared to have been replaced by a belligerent, inappropriate and impolite stance for me, myself and I and the rest of you be damned. I can blame Bill O'Reilly for that, but guess what? I can blame Jon Stewart, too.

Now, I am NOT going to recite a new list of Woe's on our world. You can do that on your own. I simply wish to say that, sometimes, our grip on this world of the living is actually a grip on the cultural falsehoods that deny us from REAL living, and that ultimately it is up to YOU, individually to discern what is good and noble and true, and, more importantly, to find the face of God in the crowd. So do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that YOU might discern what is the will of God.

Finally, how the heck are we supposed to do this? This is hard work we're inviting you to. After Larry's invitation to the hard work of Lent last week, and my naming of Jon Stewart and Bill O'Reilly as tools of the empirical culture, I'm afraid some of you aren't going to show up to worship for another month! But don't let that happen. Stick to it, because in this community of faithful pilgrims, practitioners and non-conformists, you will find strength for the road ahead.

And that leads me to my final passage today. This comes from Matthew's gospel, (it's in Luke's as well.). "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." These words of hope and promise are offered by Jesus near the end of his sermon on the mount in Matthew's gospel, and they come as a welcome breath of fresh air for those seeking a new way of understanding God in the world. May they be so for you as well. In this promise made by Jesus is the blessed assurance that we began with today.

The final piece of encouragement I want to offer you today in your process of spiritual discernment is this; even as we ask the tough questions of ourselves, and find some really difficult and challenging areas of growth in our spiritual lives that require some work, there is, within and without, a spiritual being that is cheering us on, standing behind doors we thought locked and shuttered, ready with open arms and blessings, just waiting for us to knock. For all the hard questions that we ponder (and I loved that so many of our new members last week mentioned that this is a church where asking the tough questions is encouraged) there are answers ready to be given. And as we go out in search of a clearer vision of God and what God envisions for us and for the wholeness we require in our lives, let us remember that it is not

God we seek. It is a clearer vision of ourselves in relation to God's wholeness. God is with us all along.

So as we set about to the hard work of spiritual discernment, let us go forth with the perseverance and the initiative required, and with the patient expectation of more truth and more light, set to break forth in our lives.

God speed on your journey. Have a good lent.

Oh God, it is YOU who are the refiners fire,

Melt me. Melt away my fears and my worries. Melt away my wants that masquerade as needs. Melt away this culture of conformity that demands more attention than it is worth, and offer little worthwhile in return.

Mold me. Cast your image in my heart, and strengthen those places within me that are in need of support.

Fill me. In the stillness of the day, allow me to simple be here now, for a few precious minutes.

Pour into me the life giving pause that reconnects me to your world of blessed creation.

And use me. Use the gifts you have given to make the world a better place. Use my body and my heart. Use my hands and my voice to bring about a world of peace, of love, of justice and grace for all of your blessed creation.