

James is a letter written to a church struggling with the wait. Repeatedly, James advises them to be patient. In this brief passage, James uses a form of the word "patience" four times. Be patient until the coming of the Lord, he writes, reminding the people for what they are waiting. This is no small thing. This is their hope. Jesus' return is worth the wait.

Using the illustration of a farmer who patiently waits through the fall and winter for the crops to arrive in the spring, James reminds the church that it might have to wait a while. Even casual gardeners know that there are seasons when it appears as though nothing is happening with their plants. James wants believers to use the patience they have learned from farming as they wait for Jesus' return.

James encourages the church to hold onto their hope as they patiently wait. He knows how waiting can tempt us to take matters into our hands in order to rush the results that we want. James advises the church not to give up or give in, but to wait patiently for God's timing.

Finally, James acknowledges that waiting can be painful, using the prophets as an example. Many prophets suffered emotional, psychological and, sometimes, physical pain as they waited for the words God had given them to be fulfilled. James never sugarcoats how difficult the waiting can be, but still he counsels the church to be patient.

You and I may not have the same expectations for the imminent return of Jesus as the early church did. We've had 2,000 years of experience of people saying, "The end is near!" without the end actually coming. In the past several years, we've heard predictions by televangelists, the ancient Mayans, politicians, books and movies. Those dates have come and gone. The world has not come to an end. Jesus has not yet returned. We are still here, waiting patiently.

We may not feel the urgency the early church felt about the return of Jesus. We do know, however, that there have been times when we have prayed for Jesus to act in our lives and he seemed to delay giving a response. In the hospital room, at the nursing home or in the middle of the night wrestling with a problem, we have prayed for Jesus to bring healing for our family members, strength to our friends or peace to our lives. We have cried out from the depths of our hearts, "Please, Jesus, don't be late." Through it all, James reminds us to be patient, but the Bible's idea of patience is a bit different from the way we think of patience today.

Active patience. WikiHow, a website that claims to be the place where one can "learn how to do anything," offers tips and advice on a wide variety of topics. At wikiHow.com, you can learn how to alleviate back pain, breed canaries, and write a screenplay.

A section of the website titled "Christmas for Kids" contains articles on how to write a letter to Santa, snoop for your Christmas presents without your parents finding out, and draw a picture of the baby Jesus. One story even gives advice on how to wait for Christmas morning.

Many of the suggestions wikiHow gives involve being distracted. They recommend tiring yourself out before going to bed on Christmas Eve, reading a book, listening to music, making lists, or writing in a journal. The idea is to occupy your mind with something other than Christmas. If you focus on something other than the day to come and try to do things as you do them on every other day, the hours will pass more quickly.

Other suggestions, however, encourage the children to do just the opposite. Rather than trying to forget that Christmas is coming, they're advised to enter more fully into the Christmas season. These ideas include helping Mom and Dad with Christmas preparations like wrapping gifts, decorating, baking and getting Santa's snack ready. These activities not only pass the time, but they involve kids in the preparation. They allow kids to enter into the spirit of the day to come. It is not Christmas yet, but we remember that Christmas is coming by doing Christmas things today.

This is the type of patience James teaches the early church. He doesn't tell them to wait *passively*, to distract themselves while they pass the time until Jesus' return. Instead, he calls the church to enter into the day of the coming of the kingdom of God by living kingdom lives today. The examples James gives of kingdom living are simple ones: don't grumble about one another; don't complain about your brothers and sisters; be patient by loving and caring for one another.

A season of waiting. Advent is often thought of as a countdown to Christmas. We light the candles of the Advent wreath each Sunday, marking how our celebration of the arrival of the light of the world draws near. Parents purchase Advent calendars for their homes that serve as timers for the children, showing them just how many "sleeps" there are until Christmas.

Advent is also a time of waiting and preparing for Jesus. Jesus' story is not over. We live in the time "in-between": the time after Jesus ushered in the kingdom of God and the time before it arrives in all its fullness when Jesus comes again. As we prepare to celebrate the glorious gift of Jesus coming to us on that first Christmas morning wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, we also remember that we are called to wait patiently and prepare for the coming of Jesus again.

Sometimes, the wait is for Jesus' healing hand to arrive in the brokenness of our lives. In these times, James is once again relevant: "Be patient," he writes, and strive to live as those who have already been made whole. At other times, we wait for Jesus to return and make the world what it was intended to be: a reflection of our God of grace and love. Again, the advice of James returns to us, "Be patient," and seek to live as those who are already citizens of the kingdom of God.

Advent is a time of patiently waiting, a time to prepare, a time to remember. In patience, we enter into the presence of Christ with us every day, living as though the return has already happened. Patience is not grumbling about the troubles of today because we know there is a better day to come. Patience is trusting that our struggle is in Jesus' hands, even when we cannot see the outcome. Patience is living today as if Christmas has already come, as if Jesus has already returned. And so we patiently wait and prepare. Please, Jesus, don't be late.

Prayer: Advent God, we are waiting for Love without end without conditions without violence without fear. We are waiting for Justice without end without vengeance without hatred without lies. We are waiting for Peace without end without displacement without borders without war. We are waiting for Restoration without end without favoritism without fatigue without debt. We are waiting for Joy without end without reservation without rebuke without want. Holy Love, Divine Justice, God of Peace, Restoration and Joy: we are waiting for you. We need you. Amen.

Sources:

- "How to wait for Christmas morning." wikiHow.com. Retrieved May 30, 2016.
- Hurley, Katie. "5 Tips for teaching patience." ScaryMommy.com. March 20, 2015. Retrieved April 23, 2016.

Impatient for Jesus

Second Sunday of Advent, December 11, 2016

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Isaiah 7:13-14 and James 5:7-10

Kids are not good at waiting. Neither are adults for the most part, but let's stick with the kids for now. Waiting for the pediatrician at the doctor's office. Waiting their turn on the swings. Waiting for dinner to be ready. Waiting and asking from the backseat of the car, "Are we there yet?" All these are painful experiences for children, but none is quite as difficult as waiting for Christmas to come.

During the Christmas season, there's even more waiting. Kids wait in long lines at stores. They have to wait for the cookies to cool. They have to wait to have their pictures taken with Santa. They muddle through the last few days of school, waiting for Christmas break to begin, and then suffer through delays at airports and in traffic before arriving at Grandma's house. All this is in addition to the most difficult wait of all: waiting for the big day to arrive.

My sister, Janice, couldn't wait for Christmas Day to arrive. She was slow to rise every day of the year, except on Christmas morning when Janice would be up about 5:30 AM! She couldn't wait to get downstairs to the Christmas tree and the presents. So my parents had to set some limits. They gave Janice an alarm clock – set for 7AM – and told her she could not get out of bed until it rang. And she could not go downstairs until everyone else was out of bed. We'd dive into our stockings, but we had to stop and have breakfast before we opened presents. My parents tried to teach my sister patience on Christmas morning: it never really worked. Learning patience is a slow process: it seems we are born impatient. Each of us needs to be taught to wait.

Impatient for Jesus. We're talking about this because our text hints that, just as children are impatient for Christmas to come, the early church was growing impatient waiting for Jesus to return as promised. Throughout his ministry, death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus told his disciples that he would return for them, that they would one day live with him in the glorious kingdom of God. Jesus' first followers thought his return and the ushering in of this new day was imminent. With every passing day they wondered about the delay. The people grew impatient.