

## Wrath and Patience

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

We are now in our fifth week of this season of waiting, anticipation and preparation. Many of us have also made it a time of prayer, discipline and self-denial. Those alleluias and glorias are sorely missed aren't they?

Over the years, our family has made countless road trips it seems from Arizona to our relatives in the Midwest. We try to keep things fresh by shaking up our travel routes from one excursion to the next. We're not afraid to take state highways or county roads to discover new gems along the way. But at some point, it seems, every journey will inevitably include the interstate system.

Today/tonight's homiletical journey will reply upon the epistle reading from Colossians as our "interstate system," but it will be supplemented with a smattering of other sources, highways and county roads if you will. God willing, each of these will point us of course toward our destination – the cross and our Savior who will soon be hoisted upon it.

A few millennia ago, at the time of Christ, the Greeks had a word for "long of nose," not in a Pinocchio fashion, but rather in a "long of breathing," or "deep breathing" manner. This was in contrast to another word which referred to rapid, violent breathing through the nose. The first word, we translate as long-suffering or patience, and the second, anger or wrath. This pairing of Patience and Wrath, virtue and vice, is our focus for Wednesday, Lent 5.

That said, today/tonight's journey starts at the beginning, the *very* beginning...

*Of the Father's love begotten  
ere the worlds began to be,*

*he is Alpha and Omega –  
he the source, the ending he,  
of the things that are, that have been,  
and that future years shall see  
evermore and evermore*

No, Deacon Honebrink is not off his rocker. Yes, I do realize that I just read for you the opening stanza of a Christmas hymn, perhaps the best Christmas hymn, or at least, my favorite Christmas hymn. This hymn speaks poetically, poignantly and beautifully of the Son of God, the Alpha and Omega; and the church has been singing it for generations. And *I mean* generations. The text for our Hymn 384 was written by Aurelius Prudentius Clemens, a man born in Spain in 348 AD.

Prudentius, as he is most often referred to, was a prominent and prolific author, much of his work was among the most read during the Middle Ages. Perhaps chief among his classics is *Psychomachia*, or *Battle for the Soul of Man*.

The characters in *Battle for the Soul of Man* are so many virtues and vices as you've been hearing about from this pulpit over the last few weeks. One of the more profound conflicts is between the personas Wrath and Patience. Patience has been watching the battle, standing at a distance, calmly holding fast. Wrath on the other hand becomes enraged at Patience. He is furious that she isn't participating in the combat and begins to attack Patience, to no avail. Every ordnance that Wrath throws at her tumbles to the ground. She waits; because she knows Wrath will perish because of his own violence; which is exactly what happens. He soon runs out of weapons and energy, and takes his own life in a fit of rage. Wrath is his own enemy.

Astutely, some of the words used by Prudentius when describing Wrath include: frenzy, rage, infuriate, fury, anger and passion.

We know these sorts of characteristics don't we? We see them in others and yes, sometimes in ourselves. The agitation, ire and vehemence that can catch us off guard, that roil below the surface or worse yet boil over. And when observed of those in the church by those outside the church such ugliness is regarded as hypocritical, or worse yet, typical.

These human manifestations of wrath should not be confused with God's just wrath. His wrath is pure and holy, unstained by sin. Ours is contaminated and tarnished by our fallen natures. His wrath is justified, just as He is just. Conversely, our wrath manifests itself as self-serving, reactive and overly emotional; rightly characterized by the Greeks by the quickness of breath, and other physiological effects that accompany it.

Conversely, Prudentius chooses these words to describe Patience: unmoved, long-suffering, standing, enduring.

If only it were that easy! We know God is patient in His dealings with the Jewish nation, His chosen people, throughout the Old Testament. Job, the suffering servant of God endures tragedy after calamity after tragedy. Paul received 40 lashes minus one, was beaten, stoned and shipwrecked, was in danger from rivers, bandits, in danger in the city and in the country, in danger on the sea and among false brothers; and yet he, too, held fast. But those are awfully high standards aren't they? Isn't that bar too high?

Moreover, according to Prudentius, "only Patience has the strength needed by all the other virtues." Indeed, any virtue is less virtuous if it is short-lived.

This is probably a good time to get on the freeway, and take a look at our reading from Holy Scripture; St. Paul, in the Spirit of course, urges the church to avoid the self-destructive nature of wrath and burning anger. Our chief text states:

*But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.*

Later he presses them instead to:

*Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.*

That bar doesn't seem any lower. Does that help us? So is that today/tonight's lesson? We need to try harder to do the right thing? Or maybe we need to pray that we have the strength to not lose our patience and grow angry? We are called to be transformed, not conformed, right? Are we to feel guilty for the vices that continue to live in us? Is there any Gospel to go with all this Law?

**Yes**, there is. We'll find it by looking more closely at the Colossians text. St. Paul follows in the footsteps of Isaiah and Zechariah when he speaks of "putting away" these vices and "putting on" the virtues. Better translated these verbs are passive, and more along the lines of "have removed as clothes" and "have been clothed," as in, it is done *to* you not *by* you. This putting "off" and "on" has already happened to you, for you. In your baptism, you have been clothed in new clean garments. In faith, you have already put on the new self. In Galatians Paul makes it clear, saying,

*"For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ."*

God's chosen race, that is, His adopted sons and daughters, YOU, are free to remember your baptisms day by day and live lives as forgiven children of our loving Father. The battle between wrath and patience, between virtue and vice, continues now for a time, but the victory is ours in the conquering work of the One who fulfilled all righteousness and bore all unrighteousness.

Just as Patience stood fast against Wrath in Prudentius' tale, so also Christ endured the attacks of evil. As the soldiers and the Sanhedrin hurled assaults at Him, He remained undaunted, faithful, patient. The Father's Love Begotten continues to claim the victory over the evils of the world; and that victory is your victory. Luther's hymn puts it this way:

*Though Hordes of devils fill the land  
All threat'ning to devour us,  
We tremble not, unmoved we stand;  
They cannot over-pow'r us.  
Let this world's tyrant RAGE;  
In battle we'll engage!  
His might is doomed to fail;  
God's judgment must prevail!  
One little word subdues him.*

Because of His death and resurrection, because He is seated at the right hand of the Father, because He will come again in glory, we all have been clothed in new garments and are new creatures in His body. Our sinful natures were crucified with Him and have been made new. We have now put on Christ and are one in Him. As Paul writes,

*"there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised,  
barbarian, Scythian, slave, free."*

He is setting the table to make the following declaration: *Christ is all, and in all*. Our unity is found in not just the common cause or beliefs that we share. We

don't shun wrath and promote patience because doing so will aid us in making friends and influencing people; rather we do so because we are united with one another. The body of believers is one body, and our Savior is the life force – His blood, which flowed freely from His pierced side, gives us life.

So we are free to wait patiently with one another, to endure, to forgive, to bear with one another, as we continue day by day to put on the new self. You have been re-created, clothed and forgiven so that you can forgive your brother just as you are forgiven. All vice has been placed at the foot of the cross and all virtue has been given to you as a free gift.

So we respond in freedom with our gifts of prayer, praise and thanksgiving. We pray that the Holy Spirit will continue to renew us in daily remembrance of our baptisms; we praise the One who patiently endured His passion and crucifixion and fulfilled all righteousness as the pure Lamb of God; and we offer our thanks to our Loving Father who loved us enough to adopt us as His own.

**The Peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus who is all, and in all. AMEN.**

Proverbs 19:19-20; Colossians 3:8-13; Matthew 5:38-42

Deacon Thomas Honebrink

Lent 5, April 5, 2017

*Solí Deo Glória*