

IN LOWLY EXILE

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Grace Church in New York
The Third Sunday of Advent
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O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lowly exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

These words from today's opening hymn surely call to mind certain current events that have been dominating the headlines for the past week. Unless you have imposed on yourself a personal news blackout, then you are aware of the three captive American citizens who, to paraphrase the hymn, mourn in the lowly exile of Russian penal colonies.

The most prominent of these would be Brittney Griner, the WNBA player who was detained at a Russian airport last February. Griner was entering the country to play in a Russian league during the WNBA's offseason. Customs agents alleged that they found vape cartridges in her luggage containing small amounts of cannabis oil. She was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to nine years in prison. In a big surprise this week, the US State Department was able to negotiate a prisoner swap of a convicted Russian arms dealer to secure Griner's release. The pundits are claiming the trade is what Russia wanted all along, and they were merely using Griner to achieve their nefarious ends.

Every hostage out of the building is good news, but two others are still waiting. Two others are still mourning in lowly exile. One is an ex-Marine named Paul Whelan who was working as a corporate security executive. In 2018 Whelan had traveled to Moscow to attend the wedding of a friend. Russian authorities arrested him on charges of espionage, convicted him, and sentenced him to 16 years in prison. Whelan has denied the charges and the State Department has declared that he is not an American spy. Unfortunately the Russians refused to include him in the prisoner swap, so Whelan still waits. As does Marc Fogel, an American citizen who had been teaching in Russia for over ten years. In August of 2021 he entered the country with a small amount of medical marijuana prescribed for pain. He was arrested and sentenced to 14 years at a labor camp.

We can and should rejoice that Brittney Griner is free. We can give thanks for the diplomacy that made it possible. Also, we can pray that such a positive outcome awaits Whelan and Fogel. And we can pray that until their day of redemption, they receive the grace and patience to endure their lowly exile.

Forgive my little rehash of news you've been hearing all week. I do so because the plight of these political captives resonates with all three Scripture readings appointed for today, the Third Sunday of Advent. All three readings are about the experience of waiting under duress. In the Gospel of Matthew (11:2-11) the experience is John's. We find John the Baptist in prison serving an open-ended sentence with no prospect of ever being released. John had dared to denounce the philandering ways of Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch of Galilee and son of Herod the Great. The certainty of John's moral convictions had driven him to speak out publicly and furiously. As Jesus himself described him, John was no reed shaken by the wind. He was a harsh and forceful prophet who announced that the Messiah was at hand. What is more, John declared that the Messiah would arrive with unquenchable fire, an ax, and a winnowing fork to eliminate people like Herod and the Romans. The coming of the Lord would be a day of retribution. The Messiah would arrive with fists flying. It was the only way.

John was certain that Jesus was the Messiah. He had announced it publicly, and had probably advised Jesus on the next steps. But now John perceived that Jesus wasn't following the script. Jesus was telling parables of grace, healing the sick, and preaching good news to the poor. He wasn't

threatening people with divine wrath, as John thought he should. So John began to question everything: whether he would ever be released from prison, whether his vision for the kingdom was correct, and whether Jesus was even the Messiah at all. He sent word to Jesus, “*Are you the one who is to come, or shall we wait for another?*” John was waiting under duress.

John’s despair had ample precedent. It was much like the despair of his ancestors. Centuries before John and Jesus, the Jews had mourned in the lowly exile of Babylonian internment camps. Isaiah (35:1-10), the prophet in their midst, had foretold a great and glorious rescue. A redeemer, a Messiah, would come and free them. A highway would stretch across the desert and the ransomed of the Lord would form a grand parade and return to Jerusalem. When? Soon. You just wait. But as their confinement stretched out into decades, their hope was fading. Will we ever leave this godforsaken place?

To some extent, the fading hope of John and the exiles found a new host in the earliest Christians. First century followers of Jesus assumed that when he said he would return, he meant soon, any day now. He would come with power and great glory and bring all of history to a close. But as the days and then years dragged on, the delayed Second Coming of Jesus became a spiritual crisis. Thus in today’s Epistle, we hear the first-century Christian leader James (5:7-10) encourage his congregation: *Be patient, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop of the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and late rains. You also must be patient. You must be patient. I must be patient. Patience is the Advent word for all those looking for the coming of Jesus, and all the blessing we assume will come with him.*

What does it mean to be patient? Over the years theologians and philosophers have spilled gallons of ink on the topic. One type of patience they identify is called working patience. Working patience is the ability not only to wait, but to wait well and productively. In the first parish I served, the reredos behind the high altar contains carved oak figures meant to embody the various virtues necessary for the Christian life. The figure depicting patience is a woman holding a large, tangled ball of yarn, and she is working to unravel it. She isn’t yanking the yarn into tighter knots. She isn’t throwing it away in frustration, or cutting through it in anger. No, the look on her face is one of peaceful concentration as she perseveres in restoring the yarn to its useful purpose. The statue is a beautiful illustration of working patience, the companion words of which might be perseverance and endurance.

Sometimes the challenges of life call for a different type of patience: trusting patience. Sometimes that which we name evil has so entangled itself with the good that we are unable to untie it. All we can do is wait for one more powerful that we are to come and take care of it. Recall the parable of the wheat and weeds. The master of the house tells the impatient servants not to pull up the weeds, because in doing so they would also pull up the wheat. He says, “*Let both grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, ‘Gather the weeds first and bind them into bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’*” (Matthew 13:30) The master calls for trusting patience, the companion words of which might be longsuffering and forbearance. Trusting patience has confidence that God is working out his purposes, and has good things in store for us that surpass our hearts’ desires. Trusting patience knows well the verse from today’s Psalm (146:7): *The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down.*

Today’s reading from James hints at a third type of patience. We heard: *As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.* Unfortunately, the lectionary ends the reading right there, but James goes on in the very next verse to name a particular prophet: the infamous Job. You may recall that Job is the Old Testament figure who lost everything in a series of sudden disasters, including home, hearth, and health. In trying to understand his calamity he raged against God with prayers of resentment, anger, and bitterness. Job embodies precisely what we might call *impatience*, yet James lifts up his approach to life and calls it holy. Why? Job never lost faith that the living God was up to something in his life, and that God even owed him an explanation. So if

working patience or trusting patience sound too polite and tidy, you might try on the patience of Job. Go ahead and give God an earful. God is big enough to take it.

You must be patient. I must be patient. Why? Because the practice of patience – however we choose to practice it – can open us to receive the gift of God. Patience can help us to pause and see the fulfilling of God’s promises even now. Jesus encouraged John to expand his vision, to change his mind. Jesus the Messiah was here, not to incinerate the wicked but to heal the sick. John would have to look with new eyes to see the kingdom coming in Jesus. Jesus’ final words to John were, “*And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.*” It was a polite way of saying, “Don’t be insulted, John, but yours isn’t the only way of understanding the coming of the Lord. Yours isn’t even the correct way. You must be patient and look anew at what God is doing in our midst.”

It was the same challenge to the Babylonian exiles. With patience they could see that their redeemer was at hand. Cyrus of Persia came and conquered the Babylonians and freed them. But was Cyrus really the one promised to come? Cyrus wasn’t one of their own. He was a pagan, and therefore unclean. He would be unfit to travel in the grand parade on the highway across the desert that Isaiah foretold. The exiles would have to pause and rethink their vision of redemption. About that highway and that parade? It was more like a path with a trickle of people on it. But every hostage out of the building was good news.

As for the earliest Christians waiting for the return of Jesus, they too, with patience, would need to expand their vision of what Jesus meant when he promised to come again. Perhaps he had fulfilled his promise in the resurrection, then again in the giving of the Spirit. Perhaps he fulfills his promise and comes whenever two or three gather together in his name, or break the bread and pass the cup as he commanded us to do. Perhaps he fulfills his promise to come in all our encounters with those he calls the least among his own.

In this regard I think of the old story about a cobbler named Martin. Martin lived and worked in a basement room in the center of a bustling city. One night, while engrossed in reading the New Testament, he nodded off and dreamed he heard Jesus himself calling to him: “Martin, Martin! Look out onto the street tomorrow. I will come.” The dream was so vivid that Martin could hardly take his eyes off the window and focus on his work the next day. Watching and waiting for Jesus, he spied an old man freezing in the snow. He invited him in for warmth and tea. Later in the day he saw a young woman in tattered clothes, unable to protect her baby from the winter wind. He invited her in for food, and played with the baby while the woman rested and ate. Finally he saw an old woman beating a hungry boy who had stolen an apple from her. He rushed outside, intervened, rescued the boy, and even reconciled him to the woman.

Apparently, the commotion of the day caused Martin to forget all about the promise that Jesus was to come. That evening, alone again with his thoughts, he remembered the dream, and lamented that the promise went unfulfilled. Or perhaps he had been too busy and missed the coming of the Lord. Then in his sleep he dreamed that he heard Jesus calling to him again, “Martin, Martin, did you not recognize me? I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” In the dream Martin saw visions of the old man, the young woman with the baby, and the old woman with the boy appear before his eyes. When he awoke the next morning Martin realized that Jesus indeed had come the day before, and had visited him no less than three times. The Lord kept his promise, but had come at an hour and in a way that Martin did not expect.

Patience allows us to see the coming of Jesus into the midst of whatever our lowly exile may be. And that is why, on this Third Sunday of Advent, we are able to sing even now, even as we continue to pray for those who mourn and wait under duress: “*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!*”