

ADVENT 2
DECEMBER 4, 2005
“URGENT PATIENCE”

Let us pray: Gracious God, Lord of Time, help us to be both urgent and patient in this time of waiting and watching, knowing that your time is not our time, but rather that your patience with us is a gracious foretaste of salvation itself. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

We’ve been hearing a lot these last weeks of end-times and beginning-times, about waiting and watching and staying awake, about the need to be patient and prepared, alert and anticipating, eager and expectant. We’re to be “on our toes,” as we say, like a night watchman forewarned as our second reading from 2 Peter puts it, as if a thief is coming when we least expect it.

“So what?” we say. Big deal! What are we sposed to do—Home Alone’s “trip up the robber” routine through endless sequels

like some unendingly grim version of Groundhog Day? What's with this "Jesus is Coming" game that the church has been playing for going on 2000 years now?

In fact, as long ago as the time of our second lesson, maybe 50-60 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Christians were growing tired of playing the "Home Alone" game. In Eugene Petersen's translation that we use in our morning Bible studies, in a few verses preceding today's reading we hear: *"First off, you need to know that in the last days, mockers are going to have a heyday. Reducing everything to the level of their puny feelings, they'll mock, 'So what's happened to the promise of his Coming? Our ancestors are dead and buried, and everything's going on just as it has from the first day of creation. Nothing's changed.'"* Nothing does seem to change, does it, as the church year keeps spinning on endlessly, and Advent comes up

year after year, and we go on waiting. But waiting for what?

Some think maybe the latest book of the New Testament to be written around the end of the first century, 2 Peter's way of explaining it in the face of the church's chronic frustration at the seeming delay of the end time is this: *“Don't overlook the obvious here, friends. With God, one day is as good as a thousand years, a thousand years as a day.”*

Now stop to think about that for a moment. That's a mindful to digest isn't it? It's one of those show-stopping passages like Psalm 8 or Job 38 or where Jesus reminds us that God numbers the very hairs of our head and marks the loss of a single sparrow in the vastness of the universe God created. Note how this glimpse into God's eternal perspective **beyond time** deepens not only our appreciation for God on the “macro” level—where a human millennium is but a snap of God's fingers, so to

speaking—a feeling maybe suggested by the awe of Galileo and his buddies who peered through the first telescope as they “discovered” universes of galaxies beyond our imagining—a mind-boggling “enlargement” of our puny human-centered perspective.

But also notice how 2 Peter “thickens” our human perspective of time for not only are “a thousand years like a day” but “a day is like a thousand years” as well—a “micro” perspective that opens up and expands worlds of possibilities beyond the “naked eye,” in which a nano-second becomes for God as eternity.

The upshot of this meditation on time from God’s time-transcending perspective is that it’s ludicrous for us mortals to question the time-table of God’s promise-keeping. 2 Peter counsels: *“God isn’t late with the divine promise as some measure lateness. God is restraining godself on account of you, holding back the End because God*

doesn't want anyone lost. God's giving everyone space and time to change."

This word "change" is the Greek word "*metanoia*" a word that literally means "change of mind" and which is often translated "repentance" — "**life change**" Petersen often translates it. Only then does 2 Peter go on to warn that the day of the Lord will come "*unannounced, like a thief. The sky will collapse with a thunderous bang, everything disintegrating in a huge conflagration, earth and all its works exposed to the scrutiny of Judgment*" — an eventuality when it will be too late to do anything about it when God's "long suffering", for that's what "patience" really means, has finally ended.

But, in a passage we seldom hear except once every three years in today's second reading, 2 Peter goes on to ask **the** ethical, practical question we all yearn to ask in the face of these end-time scriptures: "*So what are we to do—how are we to be prepared*

for the promised surprise God holds in store for us humans and indeed all creation?”

2 Peter’s way of putting it in our NRSV translation is: “*Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, **what sort of persons ought you to be** in leading lives of holiness and godliness as you **wait for and hasten** the coming of the day of God, as you expect and earnestly desire—seek eagerly—yearn for—the coming of the day of God.*”

2 Peter’s answer is this—and now listen closely. “*In accordance with God’s promise,*” the answer comes quietly and eloquently, “*we **wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.***” Notice first the promise of “new heavens and a new earth,” words 2 Peter borrows from the prophet Isaiah and that John the Revelator also borrowed to describe God’s ultimate intention of “re-creation” of heaven and earth and not its utter obliteration—a time of new creation.

But then too I hope you were struck by that marvelously evocative phrase that immediately modifies the promise of “new heavens and a new earth”: “*where righteousness is at home*” —which might also be translated “*where justice dwells.*”

Do you get that? Not a catalogue of do’s and don’ts. Not a virtue list and a vice list codifying that behavior befitting the end time. But simply, 2 Peter says, live expectantly in accord with God’s promise — what brother Martin Luther time and again simply called “trust” — living toward God’s promises, leaning into God’s future — waiting and even urging on the new heaven and earth that God has promised are struggling to be born where justice will at long last be at home, where, I like to picture it, justice can hang up it’s hat and put up its feet — for justice has finally found a home on earth!

Today’s reading from Isaiah 40 and the very opening words of Mark’s Gospel

which narrate the Good News of Jesus Christ as beginning with the appearance of John the Baptizer out in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance—of life change—as prelude to the coming of the yet more “powerful” one who is coming, essentially tell this same old story we hear every year—and need to heed every day of our lives, as the rhythm of our baptisms, the rhythm of repentance and forgiveness, the revolution of death and resurrection, is experienced in our daily lives as we expectantly and patiently live toward the promise of God’s reclamation project for the cosmos—new heavens and a new earth, when Christ will return and righteousness—God’s justice—will finally and fully be at home.

This week I saw the movie “Milk” that we’ll be talking about today after worship in our new monthly forum—a critically acclaimed “biopic” starring Sean Penn that tells the story of the rise to prominence of

Harvey Milk, San Francisco's first gay supervisor and perhaps the first openly-gay elected official in the US. Ruth and I happened to be constituents and near neighbors of Harvey Milk in the neighborhood of the Castro where I served my first call as pastor of St. Francis Lutheran Church. Earlier last week Ruth and I also saw the documentary film "The Times of Harvey Milk," up at the UCLA Film Archives' Billy Wilder Theatre, a film we'd seen nearly 25 years ago when it won the academy award for best documentary. I remember saying then that it's almost like seeing a home movie for the two of us, so vivid and memorable are those events—especially the events surrounding Harvey's assassination—which occurred just 30 years ago last week.

You've heard various versions of this before from me, and I'll have opportunity to go into more detail during our Forum, but for now let me tell you that for virtually my

entire pastoral ministry now of almost 35 years, I have longed for “justice to find a home” among us in this matter of the full inclusion of glbt people first of all here among us in the church but also of course in the larger society and global community.

We’ve recently, of course, suffered a frustrating and disappointing set-back on the road to justice “coming home” in this matter with the slim victory of Proposition 8 whose constitutionality is even now being reviewed by our California Supreme Court. But consider that 30 years ago we were beating back an even more dangerous anti-gay initiative supported by a then nascent Christian coalition before it had a name that featured the evangelical orange juice queen from Florida, Anita Bryant. It was this threat that prompted the great majority of us Lutheran pastors in SF to come up with a statement after months of Bible study and conversation that we entitled “Toward a Pastoral Stance of Homosexuality” — a

statement that I'm proud to say stands up pretty well after 30 years.

But let me tell you that 30 years ago same-sex marriage wasn't even on the horizon as an issue and we weren't even imagining yet pressing for the ordination of openly gay men and women in committed relationships. What I'm suggesting is that 2 Peter's musing on the perspective of God's time is that it helps give us perspective in this **meantime** as we watch and wait with "urgent patience" for God's justice to find a home in our midst—including this matter of the full inclusion of lgbt persons which seems often so frustratingly slow for those of us who've been part of the struggle all these years. And yet a movie like "Milk" helps us to see how far closer justice has moved toward finding a home among us—even if it isn't fully "at home" yet—which only fuels our urgency while making us increasingly reliant on God's gift of patience.

2 Peter concludes his meditation on these end-times with these words of encouragement, words as encouraging to us now as they were to those already tired of watching and waiting 1900 years ago at the end of the first century:

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by God at peace, without spot blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

I love that phrase “*regard the patience of our Lord as salvation,*” just what St. Paul meant I expect when he counseled the restless Roman Christians, “*...you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.*”

The good news of the Gospel, sisters and brothers, is not that **we are closing in on salvation**. No, quite the opposite, the good news is that salvation is closing in on us

from God's good future. Salvation is not something we must find, it's something we can only await as we trust in while working in the firm conviction of God's promised destiny. The good news is that God's time and God's timetable are not ours. But as today's Psalmody assured us, the promise is that "*steadfast love and faithfulness will meet and that righteousness*" — meaning God's justice — "*and peace will kiss.*" Thanks be to God.

So, let us take to heart these closing words of the Letter of 2 Peter, "*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity.*" Amen.