

PATIENCE

Psalm 90: 1-4, 10-12

[Augsburg College Chapel, Advent I, 30 November 2009]

For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night. (Psalm 90: 4)

I was thinking about the title of my homily yesterday – the first day of a new church year in this liturgical season of preparation that we call Advent – as I spent countless hours helping my 3rd grade son do his math and English homework. Patience, I thought to myself, God give me patience.

It is a prayer we all might offer up as Advent begins and we try to make sense of our life together as God's people in the world – as a people who have received the gift of faith and now must live in the world as those with whom God has come to dwell. Patience, we pray, God give us patience.

As Psalm 90, assigned for this first Monday in Advent, shows us, patience is a long-standing theological topic. A thousand years for God is like a day just gone by, the Psalmist sings. My theological understanding of patience did not, however, come to me in my long years of divinity school study. Instead, I learned this important theological concept while reading a series of children's books by Madeleine L'Engle, whose *A Wrinkle in Time* (and the series that followed, including *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*) was the story of a quirky girl named Meg, her overly-intelligent little brother, and their time-transcending journey to save their physicist father with the help of three mysterious beings.

L'Engle is the writer who first taught me the incredible difference between two words in Greek, *chronos* and *kairos*, which both are translated in English as "time," but in the original Greek are vastly different. Chronos is the time on your wrist watch, time on the move, passing from present to future and so becoming past. Kairos, on the other hand, is qualitative rather than quantitative. It is time as a moment, a significant occasion, an immeasurable quality. Kairos is God's time, it is real time—it is the *eternal now*.

As the Advent season begins, we recall the remarkable ways in which Kairos has broken into our Chronos – and how our lives will never be the same. When our God broke into human history to proclaim the kingdom among us, God came to show us in *chronos* the reality of *kairos*. Our God, heaven cannot hold him, we proclaim in this year's Advent Vespers theme. Kairos is that time – God's time – which breaks through chronos with a shock of joy, time where we are far more real than we can ever be when we are continually checking our watches. "Are we willing and able to be surprised?" L'Engle asks. "If we are to be aware of life while we are living it, we must have the courage to relinquish our hard-earned control of ourselves." We must have the courage and patience to live aware that the kingdom of God is *close at hand*.

And here we are, just like the shepherds in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, going about their ordinary work when an angel appears before them and the glory of the Lord shines around them. "Do not be afraid," the angel announced. "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you" (Luke 2:13-14). At this invasion of kairos into the routine of chronos, the shepherds choose to respond with action: "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about" (2:15).

So what will we do, living in this same curious paradox somewhere between the *already* and the *not yet*, presented with a similar decision. Are we willing to be surprised again by Christ's coming? Are we willing to act on it? Are we able to release the nervous control of our daily schedules in order to stop and see the Christ, the eternal now in our midst? Are we able to find the patience we need to be God's kairos people in the world?

I've been thinking a great deal lately about time and patience and how hard it is to keep up with all of the demands placed upon me (by myself and others!) We are part of a college community in which schedules and time demands mean that we are driven by chronos. And yet the message of the Advent season is "be patient" for there is something remarkable about to happen to and for you – in other words, you are about to know the gift of kairos. And here we are, living in the tension between human time (with all its demands) and God's time (with its gracious and freeing promise).

Several sources have helped me to describe and better understand the tension in my life between the time I do not have and the longer horizon that I believe must guide my life and work.

I've read and re-read James Gleick's fascinating book of essays, entitled *Faster: the Acceleration of Just About Everything* (Pantheon Books, 1999), written on the cusp of the millennium. How about that title? Hits pretty close to home, doesn't it? Listen to Gleick's words: "We are in a rush. We are making haste. A compression of time marks the century now closing. Airport gates are minor intensifiers of the lose-not-a-minute anguish of our age. There are other intensifiers—places and objects that signify impatience...Doctor's anterooms ("waiting" rooms). The DOOR CLOSE button in elevators, so often a placebo, with no function but to distract for a moment those riders to whom ten seconds seem an eternity. Speed-dial buttons on telephones...Remote controls..." (page 9). Gleick's essay titles read like a summary of my life: "Life as Type A," "Quick—Your Opinion?" "7:15. Took Shower." You get the point – this is our life in chronos!

And then I turn to Witold Rybczynski's biography of the great 19th century landscape designer, Frederick Law Olmsted, entitled *A Clearing in the Distance* (Scribner, 1999). In the précis for the book, we read this simple quote from Olmsted: "I have all my life been considering distant effects and always sacrificing immediate success and applause to that future." With those disquieting words, Olmsted, the designer of Central Park in New York and Mount Royal Park in Montreal, reminds us that the horizon of our lives matters. We must think on the end times, on

the future good, on the history of our work and relationships, for only in our distant effects will we find the strength and courage and wisdom and patience to do our best work today—in the midst of this time.

William Schweiker, who teaches ethics at the University of Chicago, offers a theological take on Olmsted's distant effects, when he writes that "We live best as creative stewards of time." He describes two threads of thought in Western thought concerning time: one that time is full; the other that time is empty. We live in the tension between the two threads and creative stewards of time, he argues, are full of patience as they negotiate the tension.

And in the midst of that tension between time that is full and empty, we must act, we must go on, we must do as God intends for us to do. I find my inspiration to act in Biblical passages like this morning's psalm, and in wonderful devotional books like Martin Marty's *Our Hope for Years to Come: The Search for Spiritual Sanctuary* (Augsburg-Fortress Press, 1995), in which Marty offers these spirited and comforting words [about our times] – words that help me find the patience to live and act in the tensions between chronos and kairos...: "From the distance come sounds trumpeting encouragement. They herald reinforcements at hand, to be relied upon in our efforts of any day, of this day and night." (p. 39)

Here is the good news of Advent. God is breaking into our lives, the kingdom is come. Our God, heaven cannot hold him. And as we live in the tension of kairos and chronos, wondering whether we have the courage of the shepherds whose response to the proclamation of kairos was to go and find the Christ child, there are sounds of trumpeting encouragement, there are reinforcements at hand, there is our God who loves us so much...so much so that God came into our midst so that we might know the joy and surprise and grace of God's kingdom come, on earth as in heaven.

Reinforcements are at hand. May they be for all of us the source of comfort and strength and wisdom to live as a Kairos people. Patience, we pray, God give us patience. Advent blessings to you and thanks be to our God, Immanuel, with us forever and ever. Amen.