

Sermon – Matthew 11:2-11
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Grace Lutheran Church
3 Advent – Year A
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“On the Offensive”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I still remember where I was the last time the Chicago Bears were good (ahem). No, really, I remember it with crystal clarity. On Monday, January 27, 1986, the day after the Bears won the Super Bowl, my friends and I were playing tackle football at recess on an icy day at Franklin Elementary School. We were not supposed to be playing tackle football, of course. Why? Well, because of what happened next. I scooped up a fumble and made a break for the end zone. Sadly, for me, I was not as fast as Matt Erickson. Matt Erickson – who, nearly twenty years later, would get a big-league hit off some guy named Greg Maddux – ran me down and tackled me. Matt meant no harm, of course. You’ve never meant a nicer guy. But things happen. And what happened that day was that, as we fell to the icy turf, his leg levered my femur out of the hip socket. I lay on the frozen ground with a dislocated hip, in more pain than I’ve ever experienced before or since. I was hospitalized for nearly a week and missed school for weeks as I slowly healed. It was during that time that I learned something about myself that has been confirmed at every relevant junction over the past forty years: I am a horrible patient. Like, truly miserable. I don’t like needing or receiving help, but I also can’t do much of anything for myself. Even more, I don’t like pain. I am a pathetic wimp. If patience is a virtue, I don’t come by it naturally.

2. "Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord." So writes St. James. To be patient is to be a good patient, or at least a better one than I am. Patience is not waiting quietly. Patience comes from the same word as passion; to be patient is to suffer and endure. Patience is how you live in the bad before it gets better. Again, this is not my strong suit. But it is to what James calls us; even more, it is an apt descriptor of the Christian life of discipleship for us, we who live in the already and the not yet; we who believe things will one day get better even though our senses scream that everything is going from bad to worse.

3. James encourages patience from the perspective of Jesus' resurrection, but John the Baptist doesn't even have the benefit of that. Last week, we heard John's bold voice crying out in the wilderness. Repent! Turn around! Messiah is coming! But since that time, John has wound up in prison for the so-called crime of speaking the truth to and about the corrupt ruling class. He is a patient confined to a prison, not a hospital, and in this case the illness belongs not to him but to the powers that be, powers that have not been toppled yet. So, Jesus, are you the One? Or should we go back to our waiting, hoping another will come along?

4. In response, Jesus points to the signs of his ministry, drawing from the deep well of the prophet Isaiah. The blind see and the lame walk; the dead are raised and the poor hear and receive the good news. Except, of course, this is not happening everywhere, for everyone. And John is still imprisoned. To ask a theological question: What gives? What even John the Baptist seems to not quite understand is pointed out by the preacher, Bonnie Pattison: "God's revelation in Christ is paradoxical, hidden under the sign of its opposite, and hence offensive." The Kingdom does not come with the instant arrival of all good things, nor does it appear as we would design it. Jesus, born into this broken world, does not bypass our sin, suffering, and death. He enters fully

into all of it. It is from the cross, which looks like defeat, that the reign of God's love breaks forth.

5. We, like the people to whom Isaiah spoke long ago, are people on the way. Long exiled in sin and death, blind to God's vision for this world, deaf to the cries of those in need, Christ now takes up our lot and our life to move us in a new direction. Forgiven in God's mercy, alive in God's grace, Jesus sets our feet upon the highway, the Holy Way, that Isaiah foresaw. We are a people on the way, walking ever out of death and into life. Are we there yet? No, not fully. But we will arrive where God desires to get us, and not even fools, Isaiah declares much to my comfort, will be able to get lost ever again.

6. The day will come when all sight and hearing and health shall be restored. When death, already defeated, shall be no more. When all creation shall erupt with life and love, when our song will be joy and gladness. In anticipation of that day, we follow the ways of Christ, seeking not glory and power but locating ourselves in the needs of our neighbors. We suffer and endure together, in the name of the One who patiently suffered for us, in whose Kingdom the lowly of this world are lifted up. And we do so not with grim resignation, but with audacious hope. As Celeste Kennel-Shank writes, "Maybe hope is as basic as refusing to give up and sell out. Hope is continuing to be God's hands and feet in the world, even when the odds are against us. Hope is openness to transformation, listening and looking for signs of God's action happening all around us." She concludes, "Hope is trust in the character of our God as one who brings justice to the oppressed, not just tomorrow but today." Friends, in Advent, we continue to watch and wait with patience. In Advent, endurance and hope live side by side, whatever comes. Even if that means putting up with the Bears being good again. And we might just learn to be better patients, acknowledging our own deep needs and accepting help and love from those who seek to be the hands and feet of

Christ for us, as together we are transformed and renewed for the purposes of our God. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.