

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, June 27, 2021

Psalm 37:1-11

Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb. Trust in the LORD, and do good; so you will live in the land, and enjoy security. Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act. He will make your vindication shine like the light, and the justice of your cause like the noonday. Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him; do not fret over those who prosper in their way, over those who carry out evil devices. Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret—it leads only to evil. For the wicked shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land. Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there. But the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.

Friends, I am not ashamed to admit to you that patience is the fruit of the spirit that I probably struggle with the most. I do not know if it is this time in my particular life, my personality, or just my nature, but I struggle with patience—with patience for myself, my loved ones, even for the world. Patience seems to be in short supply wherever I am. I had a colleague in Kansas remind me to never pray for patience unless you're ready for God to give you plenty of excuses to practice, and I have found that to be true in my life. Now interestingly enough the word patience does not appear in our Hebrew text anywhere directly. We will see it in words like patient and patiently as we see in our psalm 37 this morning.

Although we think of Psalms as literature, they were mainly a combination of hymns and poems and lessons used by the ancient Israelites in their worship, and they follow several different formats—songs of praise, prayers for help, laments to God. This psalm, like most of them, is attributed to King David. In particular, to David's later years, for David sharing the hard-earned wisdom that he had learned living with God. Now Psalm 37, along with many many other psalms, grapples almost indirectly with an age-old question: why does it seem like evil thrives in our world? Now centuries, truthfully millennia, of minds have pondered this question. If God is all-knowing and all loving, why does evil exist? Theologians and philosophers have a word for this question; they call it the theodicy. Now greater minds than mine have tried and wrestled with this question. Why does evil thrive? We have only to look closely in our own lives or out at the world, I think, to wrestle with that question daily. And yet our psalm today frames the question a little bit differently. The psalmist does not attempt to answer that question probably because the question is essentially unanswerable to our finite human minds. But the psalm acknowledges the reality of our world while guiding the hearer to rest in the promises of god, and to not waste energy worrying about the wicked either individual or systemic evil.

The first 11 verses of the psalm repeatedly call us to recognize that all of our fretting, our envy, our anger, our wrath; they do not change the situation or the people we are fretting about.

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The psalmist is saying to us that that is a misdirection of our precious energy and power, all of our envy and wrath and fretting. So where should that energy and passion and power be directed? Verse 7 has jumped out at me and been in my ear all week long as I have thought about and prayed about this sermon. Verse 7, "Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for God." Be still.

That is a word I think we all need to hear and internalize in a world that pushes us, that thrives on busyness. Sometimes it feels like everything in our society is framed around the speed with which news requests and needs travel. I mean, friends, it was not enough for us to have super computers in our pockets. We have added them to our wrists as well so that we can know immediately when the next disaster happened or what the UEFA scores and soccer are or that Prince Harry and Prince William are still fighting with one another. I mean, it is a great technical innovation, to be sure, but it all helps to distract us; to keep us in motion moving to the drumbeat of a production-obsessed society. And God says be still.

What does it mean to be still in a world that trains us to be available, trains us to be in motion all of the time? It is not easy, to say the least. It is hard to shut that chaos and commotion out. Sometimes it feels impossible to carve a single solitary quiet moment out of a busy day.

The psalmist says, "Be still." It is a reminder for us to breathe, to truly just take a deep breath, and pause for a moment and maybe see the bigger picture. For the writer of psalm 37, being still is about remembering who is in charge because the psalm reflects clearly that God is in control. God is the center of our being.

Be still before God. In the Hebrew there is a sense of more than just stillness itself. A commentary I read this week described it like more to be made motionless in amazement and fear. To be made motionless in amazement and fear before a God that our scriptures describe as gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. A God that calls us to mirror those attributes out into a world. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for God.

Patience as Paul describes it in Galatians 5 is the trust, the belief, the faith that there is another way of being that there is a way of moving and thriving in this world that does not move to the drum beat of busyness and exploitation. Patience is the trust that God's time is not our time; that in the fullness of time all of God's promises of justice, of peace, of forgiveness, and freedom will ring true for us all.

Patience is the trust that God is in control of our lives even when our lives are painful and even when we do not necessarily see God there.

Patience as a fruit of the spirit is resting in God's promises. And yet this patience, it is not a stillness that is passive. It seems easy to lean into that patience is passive. Are we simply to watch and wait while the world burns, and God's children suffer? Is the psalmist saying that waiting patiently for God means sitting on the sidelines?

To borrow a phrase from earlier in Paul's letter to the church in Galatia, "By no means." There is no way that that is what Paul, and the psalmist are saying to us.

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Psalm 37 is clear about this kind of patience. It is not a negative posture. It is not passive stillness. Patience is waiting longingly; it is waiting and hoping and yearning with purpose, with God's purpose. Psalm 37 calls us into action, not into idleness. I said earlier that the psalmist does not answer the question of the theodicy. Why do bad things happen? And that is only partly true. The psalmist does not bother with the question why.

But psalm 37 answers the question so now what. When we hold these things together, a belief and trust in an all-knowing and all-loving God, and the experience of pain and suffering in our world, what do we do now?

The psalmist tells us, "We are to do good, take delight and commit to the Lord." Those are all imperatives' commands upon us

Practicing patience means seeing the world and ourselves with God's eyes and taking action in our own lives toward those promises that we hold so dear.

Practicing patience means living the good news, proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed; to declare the year of the lord's jubilee as Jesus says in his very first sermon in Luke 4. Now there is a juxtaposition in the being still and the action that patient longing is calling for. But the being still before God allows us to reorient; to shut out the cacophony of the world, to focus once again on God, and being active in our longing and working for God's promises.

As Paul says early on in the fifth chapter to the Galatians, "For freedom Christ has set us free ." The stillness and the waiting that we hear in psalm 37 help set us free from the chaos and busyness of the world. They help set us free for radical relationship with God and with each other.

Patience, like all of the fruits of the spirit, is both a gift to be cherished and a call to how we live our lives in the world,

Friends, let us be still before the Lord. Let us be made motionless in amazement and awe, and actively yearn and work for the fullness of God's time.

This day, patiently, and all of the days that follow.

Amen