

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Well, we are beginning the third week of Advent and I suppose everyone here is on or ahead of schedule as far as readying everything for the celebration of the birth of Christ. Or maybe not.

Our texts today, taken together, have us dealing with the fact that preparing for the birth of Christ at Christmas is a marathon, not a sprint. You likely know that I've used this image before as we've talked about our daily faith walk.

A marathon, not a sprint is also true of life, isn't it? Much of our lives revolve around doing much the same things week in and week out, year in and year out. It's truly a marathon. It is not a sprint. We cannot endure if we are sprinting from here to there and expect to keep that pace up long term.

So, if indeed we are working our way through Advent and life is a marathon and not a sprint, what does that look like for us?

Our first lesson today from Isaiah is in the last portion of the book named after him and it is a time when God's chosen people are returning from Babylonian captivity. And Isaiah is seeing what is before them as a joyous celebration of their God. What they have to look forward to is a time of re-creation where all will be returned to a time of wellness and wholeness. As they move from captivity to freedom there is no need to be fearful anymore. They are marching to their true destiny with renewed hope that God will not abandon them and keep his promises to them.

This is truly a time of joyful expectation. Just look at the wonderful imagery in the text: the desert shall rejoice and blossom, the crocus shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with singing and joy.

God will indeed come and save his people. The blind will see, and the deaf will hear, water will flow in the desert, there will be pools and springs of water, and sighing and sorrow will pass away.

And as we read the text, we know that all of this is a process. It is not going to be experienced all at once. It is a process they need to walk through and be aware of as they seek to be God's faithful people.

Our second lesson from James begins with the words, "be patient." Just as the farmer plants the seeds and waters the ground, patience is needed until the time of harvest. And just so, says James, you and I need to be patient and as we do we need to strengthen our hearts. We are not to grumble against one another. We are to appreciate the prophets of old and the lessons they impart.

Again, the bywords are "be patient." Remember – this is a marathon; it is not a sprint. We must be in this for the long haul.

And I have to say that patience is one of those qualities that seems to be in short supply right now. And maybe even more so in that we are just two short weeks from Christmas Day.

We know that patience seems short in general all the way from shoppers in stores to the attitudes of many people who work with the public.

Yet James would have us cultivate patience. And that means we need to practice and practice and move away from discontent. While that may be easier said than done, it is what we as followers of Christ are called to do at all times – from Biblical times to today.

Last week you may remember that our gospel text told us of John the Baptist in the wilderness calling all people to repent for the time is near when God's Messiah will be made known. Seems like a sprint. Do it now. The time is at hand.

Today, however, we find John in prison. Jesus, the Messiah, is now on the scene and John begins to wonder if indeed Jesus is the promised one of God. He's still in sprint mode. He wants Jesus to do all the things that his image of the Messiah came to do at once. He's having trouble transitioning from sprint to marathon mode.

Hopefully the message he received from his inquiry allowed him to practice patience and to know that God's time is not always our time. We are the ones who need to make the adjustment. We need to practice patience.

Does John's behavior remind you of anyone? Perhaps even yourself? It's so very easy for us to want to quicken the pace, to finish the race quickly, to sprint for just a little while. And each time we do just that, we are rewarded with a reminder that nothing is going to be gained by running when we should be jogging.

I suspect most of us find ourselves, along with everyone we know, moving faster than we should, trying to catch up and moving with haste to the finish line.

It will come as no surprise then that I suggest to all of us today, myself included, that we need to consciously slow down, put the brakes on. Take a deep breath. Stop to smell the roses.

The goal then is to wait with patience for the coming of the Lord as we prepare to celebrate his birth, and to wait with patience through each and every day that we have on earth as we live out how we are to serve God daily. That holds true for us as a congregation as well. We are to wait and act with patience as together we look at what it means to be a Lutheran congregation in this great city and world.

It is easy to sometimes believe that if we are not running or moving ahead with gusto, we will miss something important or significant. While that's possible, it is more likely that if we are in marathon mode, we will become aware of more needs and opportunities and be able to amass the resources necessary to be a positive force.

I'm also suggesting that a place to begin moving from sprint to marathon mode is right here – in worship. Even as worship leader, the time I spend in worship is one of the few times I'm not looking at my watch to check the time. Too much sprint mode.

This worship space can truly be a respite from the noisy, fast-moving world outside. Allow it to be just that. Slow down, sing the hymns, listen to the texts.

Come forward and kneel or stand as you receive the sacrament, the body and blood of our Lord who gave us himself and offers us salvation and forgiveness. Enjoy the time you spend with all those who are here.

And as you leave here, I invite you to take that attitude of patience with you. It may be a topic of conversation at the dinner table. Slow down, set priorities, toss the irrelevant things aside.

And finally, I would invite you to spend some time in silent reflection, perhaps as you read scripture. Slow down to marathon mode. Enjoy the pace. Enjoy gaining patience.

Hopefully all these practices will allow us to follow Christ a little bit closer, with our ears attuned to hear him as he comes to us in so many and varied ways. As we do, we will be better equipped to serve him in works of justice and love, of care and compassion.

May we pray today and always that God would open our eyes and ears to the wonders of Christ's advent among us.

Thanks be to God. Amen