

For a long time now, I have held this image of how we are formed before birth. I must add a disclaimer: There is nothing remotely theologically official about this idea.

I imagine that before we are born, we are given personal virtues God has chosen specifically for us. Our virtues may include, for instance: charity, a sense of humor, kindness, friendship, peace, or honesty. Then, armed with those virtues, our formation is complete and we are born into this world to live with our unique set of virtues.

My image sharpens as I focus on my unborn self, with my list in hand, waiting in line for my next personal virtue. I am in a very long line, and I am getting anxious to move on to my next line. So, I just step out of line and hurry to the line for the next virtue on my list.

What virtue, you ask, did I avoid receiving? It was patience. Of course, as those who know me well would agree, it was patience. I did not have time to wait for God's gift of patience. How has that worked out for me? Not very well. Not very well at all.

The opening line of James' letter today certainly sets an Advent tone. "Be patient brothers and sisters until the coming of the Lord." Yes, there it is. Patience. "Be patient," James says. We often speak of Advent as a time that requires patience and waiting. But it is not a passive waiting, merely putting up with the trials life presents to us.

James gives us the image of a farmer who “waits for the precious crop of the earth,” trusting that time, patience and God’s providence will bring growth. He reminds us at this Advent time to live in faith in what is unseen, the “not yet.” He is inviting us to trust that time and God’s providence will bring growth. “You also must be patient,” he says, “strengthen your hearts for the coming of the Lord.”

Patience is not easy during testing times. Testing might be as we struggle with personal issues in our families, local community and diminished health. The bad news in our world of national and international strife can also test our patience. Advent patience is active as we, in James’ imagery, tend the soil of our hearts through prayer, repentance and compassion. We are like farmers and must do as much as we can to prepare. But we are reminded that we are not in control and must surrender the outcome to God’s timing.

The good news, James tells us, is that “the Lord is near.” That nearness gives us strength as we wait in a “not-yet” world. We are tempted and can grow discouraged. Indeed, James reminds us, God is with us as we wait and already at work in the hidden places: in quiet conversations, small acts of mercy, the early signs of light present even before sunrise. Have we noticed?

He also cautions us not to grumble against one another. In our waiting we might grow impatient with God which can spill over to impatience with one

another. Advent invites us to be gentle to see others who are like us, disciples on the road to a deeper faith.

In today's gospel we meet John the Baptist in prison, sending his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" This is a poignant moment in the gospel. John of course knew of Jesus. Their mothers were relatives. And the Holy Spirit caused the unborn John to leap with joy when Mary, pregnant with Jesus, visited John's mother, Elizabeth, who was then already several months pregnant with John. They may have even played together as children.

John was the fiery prophet who had proclaimed the coming of the Messiah. Jesus had come, but he doesn't seem to be what John expected. John sounds like he is wrestling with uncertainty. He might even be wondering if he had gotten God's message right. He lives in a state we know as well: between promise and fulfillment; between what has begun in Christ and for what we still await and hope.

John voices our own questions in Advent when we ask, "Lord, where are you? Are you really present at this time in our world?" The world is in deep pain, spiritual as well as physical. The delay in God's promises being fulfilled can cause us to wonder if God and the kingdom are really near. That is our Advent question. And yet, besides raising the question, we are also invited to listen to Jesus' reply.

Here is the answer Jesus gives to John's disciples about himself. "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them."

Jesus does not argue or explain. He points to what's happening: healing, mercy and transformation. Aren't those signs of God's kingdom? Advent faith invites us to look for those same signs. They may be small and hidden, or right before our eyes, hard to miss. These signs announce to us God's saving power is still at work among us. Do we not see? How can we participate in them?

We note the beatitude in today's gospel, "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." This is an Advent challenge because God's ways can surprise or unsettle us. We must be aware and respond when Christ comes to us in a form we do not expect in the poor, in the suffering, and in the "other". Faith means trusting that even when we do not see everything clearly, God's promises are being fulfilled.

John the Baptist is a reminder to us that even the prophet of fiery conviction struggles to understand how God is working. Like him, we too may wonder: where is God's kingdom? Why does it seem delayed when the world needs it to come in its fullness? At these times of wondering and questioning, we should recall James's words to us: Be patient, Be patient.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, also called “Gaudete Sunday.” The Latin word Gaudete translated means "rejoice." For centuries the Church has paused on this Sunday to allow us to reflect on the joy of Christ's coming and his nearness to us. Pink symbolizes that joy. It is customary to light the third candle in our Advent wreath, the “Rose candle.” With its lighting we are reminded that joy grows in patient faith, the kind of trust that even when the world seems dark, God’s light is already dawning.

Joy often comes out of hope. The passage from Isaiah today is a good example of that. God's people had been defeated and taken to Babylon as slaves. They lived in a desert and any hope of ever returning to Israel must have seemed as barren as a desert. But not Isaiah. God told him salvation and deliverance would come. Isaiah had hope in God. Because of the joy he felt from that hope he could say that the desert would bloom, the weak would be strengthened, the blind would see, the deaf would hear, and the mute would sing. Isaiah could rejoice in the Lord even though he did not know how and when God would fulfill his promises. Isaiah knew God would do what he had promised.

Advent is a season of hope. It is a time to recall all the times God has come to the aid of his people Israel. And it is a time to recall the life of Jesus who, as the Word Incarnate, showed us how to live our lives in hope and confidence that the kingdom of God is near. This hope requires trust and faith. And, as difficult as it may be, it also requires patience.