

Psalm 40

Patience. It's not very proactive is it? Proactive behavior (or proactivity) by individuals refers to anticipatory, change-oriented and self-initiated behavior in the work place. Proactive behavior involves acting in advance of a future situation, rather than just reacting. It means taking control and making things happen rather than just adjusting to a situation or waiting for something to happen.

But the psalmist is celebrating waiting, and patience and the twiddling of thumbs. It seems like almost the exact opposite.

This tension between being proactive and being patient, is a tension today between different wings of the church that tend to pass each other like ships in the night. On the one hand, there are the super-efficient proactive mega churches: they are purpose driven, seeker-friendly, outcome-oriented communities. Problems and goals are identified, mission statements are drawn up, and the entire structure of the church geared around the achievement of its hopes. And those hopes are taken from scripture, usually something to do with the growth of the church one way or another.

But then, on the other hand, there are the more quiet, reflective, meditative churches. Churches that prefer to focus on being rather than doing, on waiting rather than acting. Churches that actually, don't seem to do very much at all. Just waiting to see if God does anything – and then maybe, react! The danger being, of course, that if you never do anything – you'll never see God do anything... which in turn, means that you never do anything.

The proactive bunch get frustrated with the lazy churches, sat there doing not very much at all! The reflective churches get frustrated with the proactive churches, running around making a thousand plans, doing a millions things, and yet, not doing very much at all.

And then we read Psalm 40! In scripture, 40 is a significant number. It often refers to a time of waiting, a time of patience and testing. Israel wanders through the wilderness for forty years. Jesus is in the desert for 40 days – and psalm 40 begins with a celebration of patience.

Patience, though, is not popular. In a culture where we want instant results, where we want to see measurable improvement and tangible growth, where we want world cup results as they come in, when we want instant coffee, microwave meals and information at our finger tips – the call to patience, the call to wait, is not popular.

In my house, with four little children always wanting to do something – I have given up using the language of waiting and patience. I want my tea! When are we going to the park? When is it my turn on the computer? If you tell them to wait, the reaction is often violent! If you tell them to be patient, they will roll their eyes and groan with frustration.

But waiting does not mean that you don't do anything! Waiting is not a passive activity, where you sit there, twiddling your thumbs until something happens. If you are waiting on tables, as a waiter, and you spend all your time twiddling your thumbs and not doing anything, you probably wouldn't be a very good waiter. To wait on someone is to attend to them. To wait on tables, means that you are watching, looking, eager to make sure that whatever needs to be done is done in an instant! That is waiting, in the true sense of the word.

You are on tenterhooks, you are a rapid-reaction force, straining at the bit, coiled like a spring, wound up and ready for action in a split second. That is what it means to wait -

The psalm is not written by someone with nothing to do. This is a psalm written by someone in a desperate situation. The psalmist is surrounded by enemies. He is in big trouble. His sins have overtaken him. His enemies are gloating over him. His heart is failing within him. And yet, he begins this psalm with a celebration of patience – and yet – ends it with the plea “O God, do not delay!”

It is a deep foretaste of the passion of Jesus. You can imagine the whole thing being on the lips of Jesus as he faces his own execution. Of course, the temptation is for Jesus to be proactive – to call down legions of angels – Father, if it is possible for this cup to pass from me – yet, not my will but yours be done!

And there, on the cross, in as horrific a situation as a human being can find himself, Jesus waits patiently for the Lord to act. He could have done his own thing. He could have been proactive and done something about his own salvation. But he waits for God to act. And he waits beyond the point of death, for God to act. I waited patiently for the Lord – he lifted me up out of the miry clay. He put a new song in my mouth. How blatant a hymn of resurrection can be found.

It doesn't sound very proactive! Or does it? That detestable management-speak phrase, Proactive – has its roots in the Nazi concentration camps of the last century. The phrase was really coined by the Austrian neuropsychiatrist, Victor Frankl. This man had lost his mother, his father, his wife and his family in the worst imaginable circumstances. But in those worst of circumstances, he found that somehow – his life could still have meaning. His theory made virtues of courage, individual responsibility, perseverance – in choosing how you can cope with your circumstances.

Being proactive was never meant to be a virtuous opposite to being passive, and reactive. It was simply a word used to describe a course of action available to human beings under pressure. And in that sense, what we celebrate at communion is that Jesus himself was proactive! Despite the circumstances he faced – far from fighting some great battle to change them as he would if he were proactive in the modern sense – he chose instead to trust, to wait, to be patient – and to experience God himself at work. And when, finally, there was nothing more he could do – he still chose to wait for God to act.

And what we celebrate at communion is that God did act, and that God does act. That this is a God who is worthy of our faith, or more literally, this is a God who is worth waiting for! Because as the psalm attests, again and again in his own life – or in the history of Israel (it is not clear which) when we wait for God to act, God acts.

And not only that, but when we wait for God to act, we – if we have been waiting properly, find ourselves acting with Him! This is communion – this is what it means to be drawn into the life and being of God himself. This is what it means to live the resurrection life. This is what it means to be heralds of God's love in the world. This is why, in I Corinthians 13, that description used by Paul to describe love, is patience! Patience.

But we see in justice in the world NOW!

We see runaway climate change plunging our planet into a new dark age and we want to act NOW

We are struggling financially, and we want our help NOW!

We are suffering mentally, socially, physically – and we want our help NOW!

People in our world are going to die unless they get food NOW, drink NOW, unless the bombs stop falling NOW!

But waiting patiently does not mean twiddling our thumbs until God decides to get up off the couch! Waiting patiently is standing like greyhounds on the slips, straining on the start.

Waiting patiently is to be on tenterhooks, ready to react in an instant to the leading of God.

Waiting patiently – is the readiness to be who we are in this world, God's way, not our way!

Waiting patiently is being pro-active, in the fullest sense of that phrase.

Waiting patiently is