

The Waiting Game

Patience is a virtue, or so they tell us. That puts it in the same arena as such well-known and desirable virtues treasured from antiquity as temperance, fortitude, prudence, justice, faith, hope, and charity. Some of these so-called cardinal virtues are easier or more enticing to practice than others, of course, but we can surely see the merit of perfecting their demonstration in our lives.

From time to time life circumstances may give rise to occasions to practice the cardinal virtues and work on perfecting them. For example, a loved-one's ill-health may encourage us to practice hope. A promising but risky business opportunity may cause us to practice prudence. As a parent of squabbling children, we may be called upon to referee and to practice the administration of justice. Tempting foods, drinks, and activities in which we can all too easily overindulge, may give us the chance to practice temperance, and so on. Here and there, off and on, we may be presented with opportunities to practice being virtuous in a variety of ways. We need only be alert to the prospect of growing in virtue as appropriate occasions arise.

But growing in our capacity for patience seems a little different than growing in the other cardinal virtues. It's different because patience has a very regular and predictable pattern for practice. After all, it is a virtue we Christians are more or less forced to explore each year at this time. You see, this is the start of the season of Advent – the season that precedes Christmas, and therefore the time to prepare and WAIT for the birth of the babe of Bethlehem. Whether we will succeed in undertaking the wait patiently or impatiently will say something about our development of the virtue of patience.

How good are you at waiting? Our culture, oddly enough, may give lip service to patience being a virtue, but it acts as if those who wait patiently are misguided or lazy or uncommitted. Who wants to wait? Wouldn't we rather have fast food, quick service, rapid turn-around, and instant results? Don't we admire the people who just get out there and get the job done, now?

So why work to develop the virtue of patience? We appreciate the season of Advent for raising that question for us each year and forcing us to acknowledge that we are just plain powerless before the slow, relentless passage of time. We can neither rush the days of Advent nor delay them. They will come and go at their own reliable pace. Christmas is immovable, no matter how we would like to hurry it into existence.

Of course, if we can learn this lesson in Advent, it is a lesson that can carry over into our faith lives well beyond the season. There may be real virtue in humbly acknowledging that some other aspects of our lives are not subject to our pushing and prodding them to fulfillment too early, either. There will inevitably be occasions when we must wait for a diagnosis, for an apology, for a resolution to a problem, for forgiveness. We can wait impatiently and anxiously. Or we can learn the lessons of Advent and wait patiently and trustingly.

How good are you at waiting? Now is a good time to practice.