

***Peace and Patience***

December 10, 2017

Pastor Scott Austin

artisanchurch.com

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Well for words of assurance following that confession of our sin, hear this text from the lectionary readings from Isaiah 40:1-11. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, every mountain and Hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.' A voice says, 'cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry?' All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings; lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!' See the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep."

I want to combine our regularly scheduled Growing in Faith Together Capital Campaign update with the sermon. Now, as you know, if you've been around, I've been trying to keep these things separate. I've been trying to keep the money updates separate from the Advent stuff, not because they necessarily are mutually exclusive, but just because you know I'm trying to compartmentalize my pastoral tasks, if you will. But this week the two things intertwine in a way that I kind of have to put them together, and I hope that I will be able to communicate that in a way that that connects the two things for you as well. So, let me explain what I mean. It's Advent, the second Sunday in Advent, and last week we kicked off Advent by talking about waiting. I had a sermon entitled "The gift of waiting", how waiting can be, yes it can be hopeful, but it also can be what? Painful and scary and confusing and it sticks us in this kind of

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in-between time between the two eras of waiting that we observe during Advent: the idea of, sort of, viscerally waiting or, vicariously waiting for the coming of the Jewish Messiah, the birth of Jesus, the little baby part of Christmas, and also waiting, you know, as Christians, for the second coming and for whatever God is going to do next, on a big, kind of cosmic scale. And so I used one of my favorite theological terms: the already/not yet. It's already been done, but not yet completed. That kind of thing. And the title that I chose weeks ago now for today's sermon is "Peace and Patience." It stands to reason, Advent is about waiting, so what do you need when you're waiting? Well, you need patience. We want the peace of Christmas, but it's not here yet, we're not there, so we need a lot of patience as we wait for peace. I figured it's like a real good, right down the middle of the plate kind of Advent sermon and it fit well with the the lectionary texts and all that kind of stuff.

And boy has it become more poignant for me for a variety of reasons since I had titled the sermon, but obviously we have a lot of things to try our patience right now. There are a lot of disruptions to our sense of peace in the world today. I've had, like probably three or four different pastoral conversations since I walked in the doors this morning with people who have had their peace disrupted in one way or another. Many of us are wondering what our healthcare situation is going to be like in the coming year, many of us are wondering how our tax obligation is going to change in the coming year. And that's like, this is not making a political statement here, you know I'm not interested in that, in this context, but we're all thinking about how these things are going to affect us. We're looking at the the situation in the world and wondering when and where the next war is going to break out and what impact it's going to have on us. We're wondering if our politics, which have pushed us apart so rudely and forcefully over the last year or two, are going to be healed or if it's going to keep getting worse and worse and worse! We're realizing that violence against women is far more pervasive than some of us ever knew and those of us who didn't know might not have been willing or able to talk about it. And that's just the headlines since the last time we were all in this room together seven days ago!

But here's the reason why I wanted to put the capital campaign update in the sermon, the sermon that's called "Peace and Patience", because the truth is, for me this is something that has been weighing on me and it has been causing me to feel sort of robbed of peace. Something that has been certainly testing my patience with the whole process, something that's caused me to worry. You know, when you undertake a big fundraising endeavor, you resolve to do it, way way in the past now, we resolved to do this. And we thought, "Hoo Boy! That's a big deal! I wonder if we can do it? I hope we can do it! What if we don't get to do it? Well let's just get going!" And you kind of get under way, you do all the work, and you preach the sermon series when you start to see the pledges come in. And now, it's like, I'm still

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thinking, “what if we can’t do this?” I'll be honest with you, like that's my sense and I'm not trying to stress you out with it, but I need you to know that when I've been preparing a sermon this week on Peace and Patience, both of those things have been disrupted for me and made hard for me by this campaign. And I have ways to make that feel a little better in a minute.

Stay with me for a second, but I want to give you the actual numbers because the is after all a campaign update. I'm going to give you two sets of numbers: one is the dollar amount, and one is the number of pledgers. We have these two goals in mind: the fundraising goal for this campaign, as most of you by now know, is around \$425,000 and, as of this morning, we were at \$262,000, which is once again good. We made a nice leap over the past week and I did the math, I did it in my head, 62%.

[Laughter]

So, we're more than halfway there, I would say it's fair to say we're well past halfway, haven't quite gotten to two thirds. So the other number that we have been seeking as a goal is a number of people or families or households that will pledge to the campaign in any amount, and that goal was 100 people or households, and we have gotten exactly 50 as of this morning. So, that goal is trailing the other one: we are 50% of the way there and to put that in some perspective, in the previous fiscal year at Artisan, there were 106 unique givers for the whole year at Artisan, who gave at least once to Artisan's ministry, just in the general fund. So, what we're shooting for with this goal, in many ways, might be like an even more distant target than the dollar amount goal, because we want to get a lot of people involved. And listen, I'm starting to realize that we're not going to make it unless we hit that second goal. The first goal will only fall if we achieve the second goal, or at least get a lot closer.

And so some of you were here last week and heard me say something to this effect, but if you weren't here and even if you were, let me reiterate it: if you have been a person who thinks, “Yes, I care about Artisan. Yes, I believe in the goals, but I am not a person of means and my contribution isn't going to make that much difference, and things are kind of tight for me right now anyway, and so it's probably OK for me to sit this one out.” If that describes you, let me encourage you: your participation does make a difference, your small pledge will get us there if it's combined with lots of other people who are doing that. And there are others -- a few people said this to me after after the first service -- “yeah I'm number 51, I'm really sorry I have been meaning to do this for weeks and weeks, I just keep forgetting, and it has nothing to do with my, you know, there's no internal turmoil for me. I just haven't remembered to do it.” So, maybe that's you as well.

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Now here's the thing, two things actually. One is: I was talking with my spiritual director this week about the stress in my life including this one, and she said to me, she's a very wise person, I said you want to preach on Sunday at Artisan? She said "no, they should probably hear this from their pastor." She said to me, "so how is this sense of unease driven you to more prayer?" And I was like, "I think the hour's over. I have to go now, I have something I need to do!"

[Laughter]

And I just realized, I am entirely derelict in my duty to pray for this campaign. I have been so busy with all the other things in my life that sitting down to pray for this has not been at the top of my priority list, and I suspect that that's been true for all of you, in part because your pastor hasn't even asked you to pray for a campaign, not recently anyway! And I actually think that does make a difference, that God will stir people's hearts if we pray to that effect. And so we're going to pray together in a minute, but I'm going to ask each of you, whether you're giving or not, whether you can or can't give, to pray for this this week every day, if you would. I'm going to pray for it every day and I hope that you will too. Pray that we will meet our goals, pray that God will provide for us regardless of whether we meet our goals. And that's really the second thing, I want you to know: the fact that this has been weighing on me, and I'm now kind of sharing it and sharing the weight of it with you -- it's not because if we miss this goal that, you know, the church is going to dissolve. It's not because if we missed this goal we're never going to serve children or people with disabilities, or queer folk, or any of the people we're trying to serve better with this whole thing. None of that is true! We'll still keep doing the ministry that we're doing. This is a like a big dream kind of goal. This isn't a "we're in trouble if it doesn't happen" sort of thing and in some ways maybe that makes it seem a little bit less urgent to give, and I understand that too, but I have trust and faith in God and in all of you and in the work that God has done over a decade now at Artisan, that that work is going to continue, one way or the other. But, I want you to know that we have some work left to do and I hope that if you've been kind of on the fence or postponing it, that you'll dive right in this week, and most of all hope that you will join me in praying for this campaign this week. So, let's pray together now, if you will join me in this moment.

God, thank you that you are always present with us, even when we go about our business so furiously that we we seem to forget. And my confession today is that I have failed to seek your face on this, that I failed to cry out to you and failed to lead others to do that as well. And I pray that this conviction would lead to a renewal of prayer in our community, with me and with all who care about Artisan and call it their home. As we pray, today and this week, we pray that you would stir the hearts of the people whose hearts are in need to be stirred. We pray that you would provide for us as we step out into uncertainty and that we would be given and

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granted a deeper trust in you and your provision as we make bold sacrifices for this campaign, and for all the other things that we're doing in our lives. And we pray that through it all, we would see more and more evidence of your light driving out the darkness in our world. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

So, thank you for that. By the way, if you are ready to give, you can use the mobile app, there's a button right in it that you can tap. Artisangrowing.com has a button you can hit that will take you right to the pledge form. If you're a pen and paper person, we have these forms in the booklets outside in the lobby. We are still selling the shirts, were taking orders for the shirts today. If you haven't gotten your shirt order in please do that if you want one today, I think it's the last day to do that. You don't have to pay now, but if you put your name in and tell us what size you want and stuff. And of course you can get your pint glass or your bottle or the book, whatever you want as a thank you gift for being part of the campaign. So all that stuff is right outside to take a look at it as you leave today.

Alright, so given all that we are facing, not just here at Artisan, but around the world, I am very grateful for the lectionary readings that we had today. Last week's readings, if you were here, they were a little bit unsettling and today we're starting to see little bits of the peace of Christmas creeping into the season of Advent, which of course is what it is: it's the unfolding of Christ's peace and the glimmers kind of get through the cracks. It's that Leonard Cohen lyric: "there's cracks in everything that's how the light gets in." So, I'm grateful for readings that say things like what Psalm 85 said, we read this as the call to worship: "God will speak peace to his people." And then how about this beautiful image: "righteousness and peace will kiss each other." Or like Isaiah 40, which I read as the words of assurance following our confession of sin, which says: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God, speak tenderly." And then another beautiful image of God as a shepherd who will gather the lambs in his arms. And I'm grateful for those words from Isaiah that say: "prepare the way for the Lord", because God is about to do something. And I'm grateful for the Gospel reading, which we actually didn't get to read publicly today, but which attributes that prophecy from Isaiah 40 to John the Baptist, who prepared the way and cried out in the wilderness for Jesus, the Messiah.

I'm grateful for some hope, for something to look forward to, if you will, but the key question is: what do we do in the meantime? What do we do in the meantime, while we're waiting? That's what I want to talk about today, and to do that I want us to turn our attention to the Epistle reading from the lectionary, which comes from the book of 2 Peter 3. Now, if you brought a Bible with you please turn to 2 Peter 3 and if you didn't bring one with you and you like to follow along visually, you can use the red Bibles and turn to page 988 to find it there. You can also read on your phone, or whatever device you have would be fine. While you're finding that,

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this is a really interesting text, 2 Peter 3 we're going to read 8-15, it has a mixture of some very helpful stuff, some very, kind of, inspiring, hope-bringing words, and then, on the other hand, it has some stuff in it that, if we're not careful, can easily distract us, that is to say it can make us take our eyes off the ultimate truth by causing us to try and figure out some of what you might call the "lesser truths". Have you ever been caught in that trap? Reading scripture or doing anything that you fail to see the forest for the trees. You get so, kind of, drilled down on some specific thing that you miss the big picture? Has that ever happened to anybody? I think we are very much at risk of that happening with this passage from 2 Peter. As a matter of fact, I see two specific pitfalls in this text and I'm going to talk about each of them because each one of them, if we can avoid them, leads us, as you get past the pitfall, to something beautiful and inspiring. Alright, so two pitfalls, but two beautiful inspiring observations.

So let's take a look at 2 Peter start with 3:8, and the first pitfall hits us right there, it's the first verse of today's reading. This is what it says: "But do not ignore this fact, beloved, that with the Lord, one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like one day." Did you hear how I did my movie trailer voice in that?

[Laughter]

It's because the risk, the temptation here, is to take a text like this and use it like a little Orphan Annie decoder ring, right, it's to apply some kind of apocalyptic math problem to these words to try to figure out exactly what day the end of the world will come, right. And it makes for fairly mediocre, but somewhat popular movies, and let's say, a novel series.

[Laughter]

To do that kind of thing with the text, in my opinion, it's a violation of the literature of it. Because it's not a math problem, this is not against people who like math for whatever weird reason. Math problems are great they do they help us get the space things to the moon, right?

[Laughter]

Now here's the thing: if you take this verse, "OK well every time the apocalyptic literature says one day it means a thousand years because it says right here in 2 Peter, 'one day is like a thousand years.' So, if something takes four days in the book of Revelation, it must mean that that part of history takes four thousand years, and if you do the math you can find out that..."

No! Stop it! Stop! What that means, what it means when it says "one day is like a thousand years with the Lord" is simply that God marks time on a different scale than you and I. It's not any more complicated than. It means that our sense of time is not the same as God's sense of

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time. Which presents its own problem, which is that: sometimes something we want God to accomplish in one day doesn't get accomplished for a thousand years. That's hard! That's a pretty big multiplier! That's a lot of days in a thousand years! And what about those of us in the room, those of us in the world, those of us throughout history, who have said to God, along with the Psalmist's, "'How long O Lord? Will you hide your face from me forever?' It has been years that I've been coping with this thing and days that are a thousand years long, I don't think I can work on that scale! You have to do something NOW!" Have you ever cried out to God in that way? The writers of Scripture have cried out to God in that way, so be reassured that it's not sinful or wrong to shake your fist at God in that way. But here's what the apostle tells us about God in the very next verse: "the Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you."

Wait, what?! Patient with me? I'm sorry, what?! This is going to be the phrase for Advent, I have a feeling, "Wait, what?!"

[Laughter]

"Wait, here I am, looking at the world around me wondering how it could be that God continues to delay before sending Jesus back to clean up and maybe clean house and feeling that with each passing day, which sort of feel like a thousand years a peice, things get worse and God seems more and more distant and removed from the world, and the answered that you're giving me, Mr. Apostle Guy, is that God is not slow the way you think but he's patient with you?"

Yes, patient with you. It's not polite to point, but I'm going to point, a little bit, gently. God is patient with you! If you think God is slow, consider the possibility that God is being patient with you.

Now don't get upset with me just yet, don't ride me out on the rail, just yet, because we know there are all kinds of passages in the Bible that call us to work to tear down the demonic systems and structures of corrupt governments and defiled religious institutions. There are passages in the Bible that call us corporately to repent as a society, as a church, for the sins of our broader culture in which we have become complicit. There are passages that call us to reject the siren song of empires and violence, and if you stick around at Artisan, or if you've been here for very long, you will hear about those passages of scripture too, some of you will hear about them more often than you want to.

But today, the lectionary has given us a text that asks you to look at yourself, to clean your own house, to attend to your own personal need, to repent -- and I looked it up, the Greek pronoun

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is singular here, it's not one of those plural y'all kind of things. If God seems slow, it may be because he's being patient with *you*, fill in your name. But what this teaches us about God, is a beautiful and reassuring thing. Read the next bit of this verse: He's patient with you "not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance." There's an "all" in the Isaiah text today, by the way -- go find the "all" in Isaiah 40 if I get boring here in a minute, just look up Isaiah 40 and think about what that "all" might mean. That's your own personal rabbit trail you can take, if you wish.

God does not want anyone to perish, so all those stories you've heard, all those sermons you've endured about how God's glory is expanded every time he gets a chance to smite somebody, that God takes such great delight in eternal conscious torment, I think it's a violation of what this very text teaches us about who God is. And ironically sometimes these apocalyptic, like kind of, mean-God-with-a-lightning bolt sermons use the same passage of Scripture, for reasons you'll see in a second, but it's such a strange irony to me because Peter seems to be saying that God is so loving and so patient as to delay the return of Christ in order that you and I should have a chance to repent and turn to the Way. So the first pitfall here, is to try to turn this scripture into a math problem, to try to predict with some certainty how everything is going to end and at what time and in what city, for example. Because doing all of that causes us to miss the beautiful message that God does not want anyone to perish, but is patient with each one of you, and with me.

So that's the first pitfall, trying to turn it into a math problem, if you will, and the second pitfall is this: it's to focus overlong on the fire and the destruction in this passage. Now, it's there, I'm not saying we should gloss over it and pretend it's not. There are words in the passage like the following: "the heavens will pass away when the Lord comes like a thief with a loud noise and the elements will be dissolved with fire, the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed." The coming of the day of God, because of which "the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved" and again "the elements being melted with fire." OK, it's all there in the text, not going to gloss over it, but once again an unhealthy fascination with that kind of imagery will cause you to take your focus off the work that God has called you to do in the meantime. So, on another day I might take a text like this and explain to you that it's possible to read this in a less literal way. That the world is not going to end in fire and fury necessarily the way that some have interpreted it to mean, but for the sake of argument let's just leave that aside and say, "OK take it on the face of it, the elements are going to melt one day, that's going to happen, that's how things are going to come to their end. OK." Even assuming that that's true. Look what the apostle tells us to do: since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort

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of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God?

And here's the hinge point, here's the big question: however the world is going to end, and there's lots of argument about that let's be honest, who cares, for right now who cares, because what are you going to do in the meantime? And more to the point, who are you going to be in the meantime? What sort of person are each one of you going to be while you wait? And the instruction is to be people who live lives of holiness and godliness. What do those two words mean? Holiness means being set apart for God's purposes, dedicating your lives to what God wants to do in the world. And godliness means being conformed to the image of Christ. Being Christ-like and being separate and considering yourself and your life as a special gift for God, to use in God's world. If everything's going to be dissolved in the end, how are you going to pass the time until it happens? Hopefully living lives of holiness and godliness.

And here's what he says, this is fascinating to me: by doing this, we not only wait for Christ's return in a different type of posture, but we actually hasten it. Isn't that interesting? We not only wait for it, but we hasten the coming of the day of God. So all the language about prepare the way for the Lord from Isaiah and then re-appropriated in Mark's Gospel, this is how you do it. You want to hasten the coming of the day of God? Live lives of holiness and godliness. I don't need to go too far down the road on the geo-political stuff, right, I don't want to get into an argument with you about U.S. policy. I'm not interested in that at all, but I have to say this because it has been rampant in the Evangelical world over the past week, recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel is not the way to bring about the end of the world. OK I don't care about, like, whether that's good national policy or not, it's not of interest to me right now, but stop saying that that is some way that God is using America to bring about the end of the world! It's not. You want to bring about the end of the world? You want to hasten Christ's return? Clean house, repent, become a more holy and Godly person and maybe don't talk about all the other stuff quite so much, and that goes for me too. You want to see Jesus return faster? The thing to do is not to start a holy war where you baptize bloodshed and call it goodness, it's not taking up arms against the people we perceive to be the enemies of God, it's our own personal holiness and godliness, that's how we hasten the coming of the day of God.

And now the last piece. The beautiful way this passage ends. By the way, it's a new heaven and a new Earth anyway! It's not like...aw man, I'm not going to, I can't go down that road. The words are right there: "new heavens, new Earth. OK, back to the road, Scott, here we are. "Therefore beloved, while you're waiting for these things..." and are we waiting for God to do God's final work in the world? Are we waiting for the tears to be wiped away from everybody's eyes? "While you're waiting, strive to be found by Him at peace, without spot or blemish, and

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regard the patience of our Lord as salvation." While you are waiting, whatever you're waiting for today, it might be some apocalyptic thing, that might be what's on your mind, you might be thinking, "OK God I don't know about everybody else, but I'm ready! I've had about enough!" It might be that you're just waiting for the end of some particular pain in your life, or waiting for the next stage of your career, or waiting for your children to be an age where they don't cause you to feel terrible every once in awhile. Or maybe you're waiting for your parents to stop treating you like you're a little tiny child and you're ready to be an adult. There's all kinds of things you're waiting for, whatever it is you're waiting for, while you're waiting, strive to be found by Him at peace. Even when the world around you is not at peace, you strive to be at peace. Even when the world around you is one big blemish, you strive to be found without spot or blemish. If you want to speed up God's timing, if you want to get that thousand year-long day down to maybe five hundred, if you want to bring Jesus back sooner, if you want to perpetuate the completion of God's work where there'll be no more pain, where every tear will be wiped away from every eye, where there will be a new heaven and a new Earth, the way to do that is not to march off to some holy war, but to work for peace. And it starts right here, in your heart and in my heart. It starts right here with you, each one of you, and with me. Strive to be found at peace. Now, here listen, even if, and even when you acknowledge that so much of the lack of peace in your personal life, so many even of your own personal spots and blemishes, those areas of non-holiness and non-godliness, are the result of, or made worse by the sins that other people have committed against you, even when that is true, and I acknowledge that it is, all you are asked to do is to strive to be found at peace. And if you will live your life with that kind of posture, you truly can regard the waiting, regard the patience of our Lord as part of your salvation.

So will you pray with me. Almighty God we seek so much more peace than we see. Our patience is tested, it seems, more with each passing day. We long to see Jesus made real in the world, the Jesus of the Gospels who loved all, who had concern for the needy, the ostracized, the outcast. And it's so blatantly missing from our world, we pray that you'd help us not only to trust that your timing is different than ours, but also to be willing to examine our own lives. We pray that you give us the courage that's required to repent of our own failings. And we pray that we would truly see the miracle of this season, when our hearts and our minds begin to change one by one, and gradually the world begins to change. And we pray that in doing all this we would hasten the return of Christ, in whom we place all of our trust. In His name we pray. Amen.

Well, my hope is always that anything that I say in a sermon, anything you hear read from the Scriptures, any song you sing at Artisan, any prayer we pray together, that it all points us to the table of the Lord. It's my hope, that at this point in the service, you are so hungry for Jesus that

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you want to come to this table and receive what is on offer: the Body and Blood of the Savior. We're going to sing another couple of songs together. There will be a member of the prayer team who will pray with you, if you'd like that. If you are not seeking to follow Jesus, if that's not part of your life, if you do not consider yourself a Christian, you don't have to take communion, no one's going to look funny at you. Be comfortable, think, meditate, pray, ponder. If you're seeking to follow Jesus in this place, our table is an open table, which means each and every one of you is invited and welcomed. You can take a piece of the bread and dip it in one of the cups -- we have both wine and juice. We also have the gluten-free option in the middle. Of course, choose the one that's most appropriate for you. And children are welcome at our table as well, so if they're in the classrooms and you like to take communion, go get them. If not, please get them right after you do, because they're probably about ready to see your faces now. Let's continue to worship God in the sacrament of communion, in song and in prayer. Amen.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](http://ArtisanChurch.com)