The Postal Service was changing its rates for first-class postage yet again and the day before the increase went into effect, those people who hadn’t bought up enough forever stamps or simply wanted to save money stood in line to get their stamps. The supply was beginning to run low so the Postmaster began to ration the numbers being sold in order to accommodate the most customers. The news of the rationing had not gone over well and people in line were grumbling about their rights to buy as many stamps as they wanted, especially if they were expected to wait in such a long line. The solitary postal clerk was taking verbal and emotional beatings one after another. She looked ragged from the ordeal and about done in. One of the customers was waiting patiently in line. When it was her turn, she purchased her allotted quota of stamps and decided to help the clerk out. She said in a loud voice for all to hear, “What do you mean you’re running out of stamps? After all, I’ve only know about this for 3-4 weeks. I have put it off and put it off, and now I come in here at the very last minute with all the rest of these people and you tell me you’re running out of stamps! Well, I never!” She gave the clerk a big wink, paid for her stamps, and left. The clerk smiled brightly and you could have heard a pin drop among the crowd still in line.

These days, we find ourselves waiting in line for so many different reasons and that act of waiting can be tolerable or intolerable depending on not just the circumstances of what and where we wait but with whom. The act of waiting in line at Disneyland offers far more rewards than the act of waiting in line at the post office, yet both require patience as we wait. I don’t know about you, but it is not in my nature to be patient. Patience, some would say, like modesty, belongs to people who most need it, and most people who need patience have not yet succeeded in their desires or ambition; they are the ones who haven’t achieved or acquired what they want, either by their own standards or someone else’s. So they are told, “Oh, be patient, it will come.” When I was young, I heard it again and again and now I find myself saying the same thing to others. Peter Gomes points out that such words can sound patronizing or silly to the one who wants to succeed and hasn’t, such as with piano students or beginning athletes. Someone who is adept at piano or sports will say, “Oh be patient, it will come” and the listener only finds such counsel discouraging and hardly a
stimulus. It becomes more an irritant bordering on an insult. Beginners can feel like losers or wimps when faced with the experienced who tell them to keep doing the work and take the long view because they will not succeed in the short run. We who have done just that, struggled for years to accomplish something, forget what it is like just starting out. “Be patient, you’ll get there!” only reminds others that they aren’t there and they want it now. We weren’t so different, we are they who are used to being, as the Black Eyed Peas sing, the “Now Generation.” Things have to come to us, and they have to come fast.

Today in James’ letter called an epistle, we hear that we are to be patient until the coming of the Lord. James is concerned with the present trials that his readers are facing and the plight of the poor and powerless. He uses Job and the prophets as examples who suffered afflictions but showed their endurance and patience. This important because without such context, James’ words could be used to continue oppression in various ways. Imagine, for example, telling the refugees in Syria, Darfur or Afghanistan to be patient while they are being slaughtered. Or remember Martin Luther King’s response to Birmingham clergy who counseled more patience on the part of black people fighting segregation. King called for a non-violent tension and direct action because freedom is never voluntarily given to the oppressed by the oppressor. Far too often the church has misunderstood the encouragement to wait, to be patient for change, even when a black man is gunned down for not stopping his daily jog just because civilians demand he do so; being stigmatized for not wearing socks and having long dirty toenails. Make no mistake- there is no room for patience there and that is not what James is talking about. No, the Lord is coming in a way and in a form that we have not yet experienced, so we wait for that which we haven’t seen, that which hasn’t been accomplished yet. But we do not passively wait – our waiting is meant to be, above all else, to act in Christ’s stead as fully as we know how. Frederich Buenchner blogs that “to wait for Christ as best we can is to be Christ to those who need us to be Christ the most. It is to bring the most we have of Christ’s healing and hope because unless we bring it, it may never be brought at all.” This is the Advent agenda leading up to Christmas.

However, the sad truth is that the Advent agenda is so thrown off course by Christmas that it gets lost in meaning and practice. At this point, it is probably wise for Christians to just
acknowledge that Christmas is no longer ours anymore; it hasn’t been for a long time. We have no claim on it, therefore the world is welcome to it. But Advent and its expectations, its call for active patience, its earnest waiting – that still belongs to us because admittedly the world wants nothing to do with it. How we reconcile the patience of Advent with the impatience of human, modern living is the problem and the opportunity of the moment. Advent is about waiting and patience which doesn’t sit well with the achievers and the accomplished because they are all about success and accomplishments. I find it ironic, therefore, that one of the most cherished games of our community demands both waiting and patience – it does not fit in with the stigma of humanity’s impatience. Golf is a game in which the slowest people in the world are in front of you and the fastest are behind you. It is inundated with people who like to tell “Dad jokes” which require immense patience, like the dad who showed up on the golf course with an extra pair of golf pants one day and his fellow players asked him why? He responded, “I always bring an extra pair of pants just in case I get a hole in one!” You want more – ask Herb, Bud, or Jim but beware – patience is required!

Patience is the theme for today and the costs of our impatience on a societal level are enormous, from our gluttony for oil, to our degradation of the environment, to radical inequalities in the distribution of the world’s goods. It is no wonder that James who is concerned for the welfare of the “have-nots” counsels patience. Knowing that this life is not all there is, and that God’s realm is far better than we can imagine, makes possible a life of open-handed generosity. Patience fosters the capacity to forego economic gain as a guide and motivation for our actions and instead cultivate mutual understanding. James gives us a prime example of what we come to understand as the patience of Advent within the work of the farmer. Patience is the essence of farming but the farmer is anything but a passive participant in the process. To farm is to live all of one’s hours in and for one’s work. I remember my best friend in high school, Kathleen’s father was a farmer. Mr. L was up at the crack of dawn and didn’t sit down until dusk. Farmers live with two ultimate truths, which are held in balance by their own experience. First, the harvest is the result of incredible patience and second, the harvest is the result of incredible work. The farmer waits and hopes for the autumn and spring rains, but there is nothing he or she can do to induce them. That is
where the patience comes in. That is where relying on forces beyond one’s control comes in. In that season of waiting, however, the farmer is hardly idle for there is always work that can and must be done, knowing that time and God alone will bring to fruition what is expected. The farmer knows that what is coming is worth waiting for, and that what is worth waiting for, is worth working for.

This is the language of Advent, and you can understand why in some ways, the world is quite content to leave it to us. It is ours without claim or competition, for one can’t make a growth industry or commercial product out of Advent expectations. It is not a waiting around for something interesting to happen, it is not a waiting in line to get something we want, but, as with the farmer, it is a working towards that for which we wait. Through the words of James, we recognize that the only hope worth having and the only harvest worth waiting for are reflected in that confident farmer who looks forward to that precious fruit of the coming of the Lord. “Be patient, therefore, beloved brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord.”