Wait. Stay Here.

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Luke 24:44-53 & Acts 1:1-11 ~ May 21, 2023

I am going to interrupt the regular sequence of our worship so we can read and hear the Gospel before our reading from the Epistle. I am doing so because the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles were written by the same author and are, in effect, written as parts one and two of the same story. I will say more about this in a moment but today we have the very last verses of Luke, describing Jesus’ ascension into heaven, and the very first verses of Acts, picking up and retelling that same event.

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When I looked at these readings with our fourth and fifth grade parishioners in Quest 45, we drew a great big bullseye to show how Luke charted the path of the story. Jerusalem, with the crucifixion and resurrection, is in the center. Through the Gospel, Luke uses geography to describe and propel the narrative as Jesus’ life and ministry head toward the climax in Jerusalem. Everything culminates in the center. The theme and the trajectory of the Book of Acts is summed up in the verse we just heard: “you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The path is out and beyond. It is a brilliant literary device, for the geography indicates the emotional, theological, and missional movement of God as Christ becomes incarnate, gathers us together, is killed and risen, then sends us out into the world.

Today, as we join the disciples, we find ourselves at a threshold – in between. There is a hand-off. Up to this point, Jesus has been with us in human form, in flesh among us. From this point forward, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, Christ is with us en-fleshed in one another, in our human form. There is a moment in between, here in the center – ten days if we take the text literally – after Christ ascends to heaven, and before the Holy Spirit is poured out upon us at Pentecost.

What happens in the center, between Christ’s ascension and the outpouring of the Spirit? In Quest 45, we talked of the between-times thresholds of our lives. The daily experience of walking to school when one is neither at home, nor at school, but on the way; the season of being no longer in one grade and not yet in the next. The students took it to a deeper level, naming the damage we’ve done to our climate and world, while being at a point where, we pray, it’s not yet too late to live differently and go in a different direction.

The word of Jesus’ teaching I hear for us today is: wait. Wait, stay here, be still; these are the directions Jesus gives to his disciples. I want to stop and focus here because… well, because I am not always very good at waiting, and I’ve noticed that a lot of us are caught up in high-paced, relentless activity and urgency. Some months ago, I asked a parishioner what she was up to. “I’ve just gotten my master’s degree,” she said. “That’s great!” I said. “What are you going to do next?” Really, Ledlie!? I am glad to say it took me less than a minute to recognize the absurdity and offense of my question. “I am so sorry I asked you that. Never-mind what’s next. Congratulations! You are here! You just received your master’s degree.” Wait. Stay here. Be here.

What do you know of being in between? Might this be a time for you to wait? Yes, there is much to do – with injustice in the world, people in need, relationships that need tending. The disciples have these things on their minds when they ask, “Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom?” As soon as the Holy Spirit comes upon them, the disciples will be sent out. But at this moment, Jesus says, “it is not for you to know the times.” For now, wait in the city; wait in Jerusalem.

Let’s reflect briefly on waiting-in-between in three ways – in confusion, in discernment, and in anticipation or preparation.

Sometimes I wait because I don’t know where I am going, and don’t know the best next step. Poet Judy Brown describes a predicament familiar to most of us. This is her poem, “Trough” (The Sea Accepts All Rivers) ~

There is a trough in waves,  
A low spot  
Where horizon disappears  
And only sky  
And water  
Are our company.

And there we lose our way  
Unless  
We rest, knowing the wave will bring us  
To its crest again.

There we may drown  
If we let fear  
Hold us within its grip and shake us  
Side to side,  
And leave us flailing, torn, disoriented.

But if we rest there  
In the trough,  
Are silent,  
Being with  
The low part of the wave,  
Keeping  
Our energy and  
Noticing the shape of things,  
The flow,  
Then time alone  
Will bring us to another  
Place  
Where we can see  
Horizon, see the land again,  
Regain our sense  
Of where  
We are,  
And where we need to swim.

I return to this image time and again. Yet, the poet speaks of natural phenomena only, and I want to weave in the Spirit of God. We, like the disciples, are blessed with gifts – of promise, faith and hope. In waiting, we return to and draw sustenance from the family narrative of our faith; the stories of Christ, maybe even experiences of God’s power in our lives, and we are inspired with a vision of God’s promise of beloved community.

Even so, we lose our bearings. Spiritual teachers in the Ignatian practices observe that we all experience seasons of desolation – when we turn in upon ourselves, feel alone and cut off. And seasons of consolation – when we can see beyond ourselves, feel connected with others, with God, with ourselves. Ignatius teaches that, as one is able, it is good to store up the feelings and experiences we have in times of consolation, that we may remember the mercies of God at a later time, draw nourishment from those depths.

Being unclear offers its own spiritual opportunity for discernment. The discernment of spirits is an interpretive sorting out of who, where, how God is present in our lives. We pray to see with all our senses that which may be hidden, to differentiate, discriminate. The opportunity is to discern not only which fork in the road to choose. In discernment we may sort and see how God is present even in absence, in our longing or pain, how God is present in all things in all times.

When I feel particularly lost and don’t even know how to pray or what to pray for, I turn to the prayer of an eastern orthodox metropolitan, Philaret, who says, “Lord, grant me to greet the coming day in peace. Help me to rely upon your holy will…. Direct my will, teach me to pray yourself in me.” Pray yourself in me.” The apostle Paul reassures us (Romans 8:26), “the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”

Finally, there are seasons of waiting best described as gestation or preparation. Through my ministry in the Diocese of Newark, I became friends with Dr. Louis Crew, the founder of Integrity and leading voice for the church’s full sacramental inclusion of gay and lesbian persons. A flamboyant, brilliant, and courageous man, Louis was fond of quoting the beatitudes. He would say, rather demurely, “blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” Then, look up, with a defiant twinkle in his eye, and say, “Look out! The meek are getting ready!”

Beloved, whether in preparation, confusion, or discernment, the Spirit is upon us; we are sent forth as witnesses and have much to do to bring about the kingdom of God. But for right now, stay here, in the temple, in the city, praising God, until you are clothed with power. Amen.