

“Prayerful Waiting”

“All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.”

“The waiting is the hardest part.” – Tom Petty

Waiting is an unavoidable part of our lives, and there are many occasions in which we are compelled to wait before what we desire comes to fruition. Some times of waiting are spent in eager anticipation of a joyous upcoming event: a birthday or anniversary party, a summer vacation, or the arrival of friends for a visit. Other periods of waiting can be filled with anxiety: waiting in the doctor’s office, or in the surgical waiting room as a family member is undergoing surgery or waiting for the results of a medical test. At times, we know how long our time of waiting will be; many trains and subway stations now include signs informing riders of how long their wait will be until the next train arrives. At other times, we do not know how long we will have to wait; and this indeterminate waiting may indeed be “the hardest part.”

Our Scripture reading today brings us into the presence of Jesus’ disciples as they are waiting for the fulfillment of what he has promised them. In his appearance to them following his resurrection, Jesus commissions them to continue his work and instructs them to wait for the coming of the one who will empower them to fulfill this mission:

- “Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’ – Luke 24:45-49.

The apostles do not know how long they will need to wait for this promise to be fulfilled; they are called by Jesus to wait until God fulfills the promise of the Holy Spirit. But because all that has happened since the Lord’s passion has convinced the apostles of God’s triumph, they hear the message of the arrival of God’s promised Spirit as the fulfillment of Scripture’s prophecy of Israel’s restoration:

- “For the palace will be forsaken, the populous city deserted; the hill and the watch-tower will become dens forever, the joy of wild asses, a pasture for flocks; until a spirit from on high is poured out on us, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting-places. The forest will disappear completely, and the city will be utterly laid low. Happy will you be who sow beside every stream, who let the ox and the donkey range freely.’ – Isaiah 32:14-20.

Even though they do not know how long their time of waiting will be, the apostles see it as a period of hopeful anticipation of the fulfillment of God’s promises; and *“so when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’”* (Acts 1:6). They see the days in which they live as the time in which the centuries of waiting for the fulfillment of the prophetic promises

will reach their conclusion when Israel is restored to its rightful place among the nations, when the people of God return to the halcyon days under the rule of David and Solomon.

- “In other words: Will the enemies occupying our land and our aspirations now be routed? Will the Lord at last declare our independence? They continue to equate political fulfillment and personal benefit with God’s kingdom.” – C. Clifton Black.

Jesus’ response and final instruction to his apostles is prefaced by the claim that God’s plan to restore Israel does not become the special knowledge of insiders: *“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.”* (1:7). Speculation about when God will fulfill God’s promises and what those promises will look like is not to be the preoccupation of Jesus’ disciples; they are not to spend their energies in wondering how long their time of waiting will be; *“Jesus does not respond to speculation surrounding what is ‘not yet’ but insists that his disciples engage in a mission ‘right now.’”* (Robert W. Wall).

After warning his followers what they *are not* to be doing, Jesus commissions the apostles as to what they *are* to do in his name: *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* (1:8). Jesus’ words echo Isaiah’s prophecy of the pouring out of the Spirit to renew Israel’s covenant with God (“*... until a spirit from on high is poured out on us, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.*” – Isaiah 32:15); this power will enable the apostles to be witnesses to *“all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning”* (Acts 1:1). Jesus’ final words to his apostles are both a promise and a commission: the promise that they will be blessed with the empowering gift of the Holy Spirit so that they may be sent forth to witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ not only to their own people but to all people *“to the ends of the earth.”*

- “The Spirit’s outpouring empowers a global mission as the divinely intended means by which God’s covenant with a repentant Israel is renewed and Israel is called as ‘a light to the nations’ so that repentant Gentiles can also share in the blessings of Israel’s salvation.” – Wall.

Jesus’ commission to his apostles is followed by his ascension, in which *“he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”* (1:9). Jesus’ ascension further validates his resurrection and vindicates the claim that he is God’s Messiah (*“Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”* (2:36)). The Ascension of Our Lord is an important part of the Christian faith that we confess in our creeds: *“On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.”* (Nicene Creed). Jesus ascends into heaven so that he might be Lord not only of the time he shared on earth with his disciples but that he might be Lord of all people in all times:

- “What is our comfort? It is Christ, our priest, who has atoned for us and looks on us and sees our enemies and reminds the Father that he is our portion. When we feel this in our conscience, we have a sure access to the Father in every need. We fail to see this only because our eyes are not sufficiently penetrating to pierce the clouds and look into heaven, and be assured that Christ is our advocate.” – Martin Luther.

The ascension also provides the motive for the apostles’ eyewitness testimony to Jesus. While they were not witness to his resurrection, they are eyewitnesses to his ascension, lending credibility to their proclamation that he is alive. The message of the “two men in white robes” summons them to begin their

apostolic ministry as witnesses to Jesus Christ: “*Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.*” (1:11).

With the departure of the Messiah and his official succession to them now complete, the apostles begin their waiting period for the coming of the promised Spirit to empower their mission. They return to Jerusalem and “*went to the room upstairs where they were staying*” (1:13). Luke includes a list of the names of the eleven apostles who returned to Jerusalem to begin this period of waiting (the twelfth position, vacated when Judas Iscariot committed suicide, had not yet been filled); the author also mentions that they were joined by “*certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.*” (1:14). They are faithful to Jesus who had “*ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father*” (1:4); indeed, whether they are able to continue what the Lord began depends on their faithfulness to God. They do not know how long they will have to wait, but this uncertainty does not lead to doubt or despair because they know that God is always faithful in fulfilling God’s promises and accomplish all that God desires for God’s holy people. They live in trust and hope in Jesus’ promise that they will receive the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and that they will be witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth.

But their time of waiting is not spent in idleness, sitting around waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit. While they were gathered in Jerusalem, the followers of Jesus “*were constantly devoting themselves to prayer*” (1:14). They had witnessed how central prayer was in Jesus’ life, how he accomplished nothing apart from prayerful communion with God (“*Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God.*” – Luke 6:12); at one point the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray, which is the occasion when Jesus teaches the prayer that is so central in our own prayer gatherings:

- “He was praying in a certain place, and after he was finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.’ He said to them, ‘When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.’”
– Luke 11:1-4.

This prayerful waiting upon the Lord will characterize the life of the church throughout Acts; they gather in hopeful anticipation of the fulfillment of God’s promises “on earth as it is in heaven.”

- “Prayers are not offered to solicit God’s benefaction, which they already have experienced, nor to ensure that God would fulfill what has promised them. Praying together publicly demonstrates the importance of their spiritual unity and resolve in accomplishing their missionary vocation as Jesus prophesied it and as God will continue to clarify it for them ... The community will have nothing to say that matters without God’s full participation in all that they do. The substance of what we proclaim and live as good news must first of all be grounded in a community that is given over to constant prayer and worship.” – Wall.

As we remember the apostles’ time of waiting for the fulfillment of Jesus’ promises, we find ourselves also waiting for this time of separation and social distancing to come to an end. We are waiting in our rooms for this time of isolation to conclude, for news of when we will be able to gather together for worship, when once again we can be the church of Jesus Christ gathered around Word and Sacrament. It has been an

unprecedented time in which what we took for granted – the ability to get up on a Sunday morning and come to worship – has not been possible; and waiting for news of when this time of quarantine will be over has been “the hardest part.” But as the disciples used their time of waiting to engage in prayer, trusting that the promises of Jesus would be fulfilled when the gift of the Holy Spirit is bestowed on them so that they might witness to the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection, so too do we use our time of waiting to engage in prayer for ourselves, for our congregation, for our community and nation, and for “*the whole people of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs.*” (*Lutheran Book of Worship*).

- “To engage in the mission of God, therefore, is to live this life of prayer: praying without ceasing, as St. Paul puts it, that is to say, sustaining a style of life that is focused upon God. This is indeed to engage in the mission of the Holy Spirit by *being* rather than by doing. To realize that the heart of mission is communion with God in the midst of the world’s life will save us from the demented activism of these days.” – John V. Taylor.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us out of our building where generations of the faithful have gathered for worship; but the mission and ministry of our congregation has continued as we worship and pray in our homes, as we reach out by telephone calls and text messages to others with words of love and comfort, as we use the social media, Facebook Live, and Zoom to support our sisters and brothers in Christ to whom we have been joined in baptism. We are separated physically but bound together spiritually as we prayerfully watch and wait for the day when we can come together again to worship and praise our Lord. We prayerfully wait during this time of separation which may be a time of renewal for us, a waiting period that will conclude as it did for the apostles who began a new chapter in the story of God’s faithfulness to God’s people when they were filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The waiting may be hard, but it may also be a time of blessing and renewal in our lives of faith as God’s holy people in this time and place.

- “The truth is, if we wait and pray and persevere long enough for it to reveal itself, is that our lives – our truest selves – are ‘hidden with Christ in God’ in a place of stillness, safety, and hope. A place deeper and truer than our fantasy and fear, anxiety and temptation. A place where we can learn to live no matter where we are, if we don’t hurry away before we ever get there.” – L. Roger Owens.

“*The waiting is the hardest part*” – but it can also be a time of blessing as we wait in hopefully anticipation of what God has in store for us. We wait not in fear or despair but in expectation that as God has abided with God’s people in ages past, God will bring us through this time of uncertainty in the sure and certain knowledge that as those who waited on the Lord were never disappointed in the past, our time of waiting will result in God’s blessings upon us and upon all people. These days of waiting are hard, but we know that they are not in vain; because “*those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*” (Isaiah 40:31). May our days of prayerful waiting be a time of blessing and renewal for us so that when we come back together we will be strengthened and empowered to continue Christ’s mission in being witnesses to the good news “to the ends of the earth.”

Amen.