

Waiting

**A sermon taken from Acts 1. 1-11, and preached on Ascension Sunday (May 16, 2010) at Providence United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina
by Dr. Ken Carter.**

In God's time we are between the Ascension and Pentecost. Ascension is most closely aligned to our word ascent---someone makes an ascent to the peak of a mountain---and for us it is Jesus himself who ascends to God. It happened, according to the scriptures, forty days after the resurrection, and ten days later Jewish pilgrims from every nation gathered for the feast of Pentecost, literally the fiftieth day following the Passover.

The law had been given to Moses 50 days after the Passover, and so it was a time to renew the covenant promise. The Ascension was actually on Thursday of this week, Pentecost is next Sunday. And so in God's timing we find ourselves in an *in-between place*. Ascension may not be a household word for us, and Pentecostals may be those people we don't quite understand, something about speaking in tongues, and yet our experience is like God's in one respect: we know about the in-between times.

What do you do in the in-between times? You wait and pray, and this was the calling of the church in first century Jerusalem. Luke's gospel collapses it all into one day, Acts stretches it into forty days. The 40 days we know about, the number 40 is always a part of God's timing---Israel wanders 40 years in the wilderness, in their disobedience, on the way to the Promised Land. Jesus is tested for 40 days in the wilderness, his obedience taking the place of our disobedience. Over 40 days, Luke tells us Jesus gave them "convincing proofs", in a court of law we would describe it as hard evidence, he talked about the kingdom of God, when everything would be set right. And he told the disciples there would be one more spiritual discipline they would need to take on: to **wait for the promise of the Father**.

The promise of the Father, we know from our reading of the gospels, was his presence, in the form of the spirit. **I will not leave you comfortless**, literally, in the Greek, "**I will not leave you "orphaned"**. And yet he does leave them. And the spirit has not yet come in its fullness. It is an in-between time. The great theologian of the 20th century, Karl Barth, called the time between Ascension and Pentecost "*a significant pause*".

We are most attentive to the language of waiting, in church, in the season of Advent. We wait for the birth of Jesus, and there is resonance with human

experience----a woman is pregnant, waiting, month after month, a very significant pause in life; or a child waits for the day when the family tears opens the presents that are arranged in some manner under the tree. And so the journey from Advent to Christmas, which is all about waiting, parallels what is happening in our experience.

Ascension to Pentecost is different. Jesus is raised from the dead, but then he is no longer with us, but he promised that something really good would happen later, and so we are waiting for that. There is one small problem with waiting---we are not very good at it. And regarding patience, or the lack of patience, I will confess: I am the chief of sinners.

We are prone, in the significant pauses toward one extreme or another---to despair, on the one hand or busyness, on the other. The despair, in the absence of God, is to forget all that God has done for us. It is spiritual amnesia. The busyness is to believe that, in the absence of God, we must take on the role of God, or we become practical atheists-----if it is to be, it's up to me!

One theologian describes this as oscillation. We stand on tiptoes and ask, repeatedly, "**Lord, is this the time when you will restore the fortunes to Israel?**", or, like the bridesmaids in the parable of Jesus in Matthew 25, we are not awake at the opportune time. I think of the child who asks on a long trip, repeatedly, "**are we there yet?**", and then finally falls asleep and misses most of the scenery along the way!

We go back and forth----the odd end of the world predictions that make headlines in the tabloids we reach for in the grocery store lines, we are "left behind!"...or we lose all hope, we give up, we become cynical, or bitter, or quietly resigned.

Neither is the way of faithfulness. The way of faithfulness is all about waiting, and prayer. And the times of waiting and prayer are not only the significant pauses in God's timing, they mark the seasons of our lives as well---we wait to graduate from school, some later this month; or we wait to see if we have been accepted into some other school or offered a job; or we wait to get married or we wait to have a child; we wait for those same children to start school and then the cycle begins for them; or we wait to retire, or to hear news about a medical test.

Fortunately, Jesus is a guide to them, and to us, in the in-between times. He prepares them for his departure. Tony Robinson, a pastor friend in Seattle, has an interesting take on what Jesus is doing here: he is giving the work, the future work, to the disciples. He quotes Ronald Heifetz of the Harvard Kennedy School, who says, "*Leadership is disappointing people at a rate they can stand*", meaning, leaders are tempted to do it all, and even though Jesus could walk on water and multiply the loaves and fish, he begins to give the work to them.

What is the work that he gives them? To wait and pray.

They ask, "**Lord is this the time you are going to restore the fortunes to Israel?**" He replies, "**it is not for you to know the time or seasons...but...you will receive power....**". He leaves them in suspense, but with a promise. In our waiting all things are suspended, they are "up in the air". In reflecting on that image of being suspending in the air, I remembered reading about Henri Nouwen, who was a great fan of the circus, and in particular of trapeze artists. He befriended a troupe, the Flying Rodleighs, and wrote about a conversation.

"One day, I was sitting with Rodleigh, the leader of the troupe, in his caravan, talking about flying. He said, 'As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him in the long jump.' 'How does it work?' I asked. 'The secret,' Rodleigh said, 'is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me and pull me safely over the apron behind the catch bar.'

" 'You do nothing!' Nouwen said, surprised. 'Nothing,' Rodleigh repeated. 'The worst thing the flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher. I am not supposed to catch Joe. It's Joe's task to catch me. If I grabbed Joe's wrists, I might break them, or he might break mine, and that would be the end for both of us. A flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him.'

Waiting is a profound act of trust, waiting for someone to catch us, to carry us forward. Along the way the disciples will become apostles, the learners will become teachers. Many people discover that the best way to learn something is to teach it, and many of us, along the way teach each other how to wait, how to be patient, this is what parents do well, this is what grandparents do best.

This is our calling in the in-between times. Most of us want something to do something, and so in the in-between times we get busy....but what is most needed is that we wait and pray.

Something is dying, and something is waiting to be born, and these are the cycles and circles of life, certainly the rhythms of God's life, we repeat these truths in our creed: [he was] **born of the virgin mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died was buried, the third day he rose from the dead, he ascended into heaven...**

So Jesus disappears in the cloud, he is taken away from their sight. **“Why do you stand there looking up into heaven?”**, someone asks. If you were here on Easter morning, you will remember Luke’s account of the resurrection, and the question asked by someone with dazzling clothing: **“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”**

What must have been going through their minds? In the end-between times there is an absence. In our family, for years there has been a small controversy about the limits to which I could refer to my family in a sermon. I will venture into that territory, a bit, but only share the experience of being a parent. I think it is relevant. As a parent you raise children and they are constantly with you, and you are with them. And then a time comes when they are, for the most part, gone. It is the empty nest. And in our home there is a sense, an almost palpable sense, of their absence. They were so present----the activities, the games, the concerts, the choirs, their friends, their interests---and now they are absent.

Ascension Sunday, for a disciple, is about the absence of Jesus, which we feel so strongly because we have known his presence. His body is removed from our sight so that we can prepare for his presence in another way, and that is what we anticipate in the promised gift of his spirit at Pentecost.

And so in the waiting, in the in-between times, we begin to focus on new things. Jesus had prepared us for all of this, in the extended teaching found in John 14. A person lives her entire life with a partner, and death separates them. She believes in the life to come, as an act of faith. Of course, there are moments of doubt, but she believes. The partner has gone ahead, into the arms, we trust, by faith, of the one who catches.

What does she do? She waits, and prays, and hopes. And she takes consolation in words from passages from John 14. **“I will not leave you comfortless, I go to prepare a place for you, when I come again, I will take you to myself.”**

Maybe we are here this morning, in church, not because we are filled but because we are empty, not because we feel the presence of God, but his absence, not because we have reached our goal but all things are in suspense. He goes to prepare a place for us, and in the in-between time we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes...we wait and we pray, we trust that the eternal God is our refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.

Sources: William Willimon, *Acts* (Interpretation); Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts* (Brazos); Anthony Robinson and Robert Wall, *Called to Be Church*; Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction*; Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Day We Were Left Behind”, *Christianity Today*, May 18, 1998.