

Easter 7A. Acts 1:6-14. May 28, 2017

You could be forgiven for having missed it, but this past Thursday was one of the principal feasts of the Christian year. It is called Ascension Day and it marks the story we read first this morning, from the opening of Acts. After Easter Sunday, Luke has Jesus spend forty days with his friends, teaching them, hanging out, and preparing them for what they'll have to do in this new world where the Christ has been killed and has overcome death. This past Thursday was the fortieth day after Easter Sunday and Jesus takes his friends out to the Mount of Olives, rebuffs their last questions, and takes off into the sky in a superhero scene, returning to his divine parent.

Many Christians don't quite know what to do with Ascension Day—this awkward feast that always falls on a Thursday and celebrates something that we kind of regret. I imagine that I'm not the only one who has thought that a number of confusions could be cleared up if Jesus were still walking through walls into church meetings and holding beachside fish-fries.

But it is a rich story. Jesus' earthly, pre-Ascension ministry ends almost with a joke. It's a riff on the old joke where the kids are in the backseat of the car saying, over and over again, "Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet?" Only here, it's the apostles asking yet again, "Will you now restore the kingdom to Israel? You've been teaching us for forty days—we get it. So is now the time when you'll chase out the Romans and make us governors and take a throne in the palace here in Jerusalem? Will you finally become what we have always expected you to be?"

And it looks like Jesus just shrugs off their question but I think there's some real heft in his answer, and that it fits a pattern we see often with God. The disciples press their expectations on Jesus and he responds by redirecting their attention to what they are called to do. "Will you do what we need you to do?" And Jesus responds, "Okay, here's what you're going to do." Now I won't claim that this is a universal law or anything, but I do think that it's a common thing in the spiritual life that sometimes what we most need is to have our attention redirected. That often when we are pushing hardest to try to get God to do something for us, God is most interested in getting us to do something for God or others.

It reminds me of a comic strip I saw where a guy is drinking coffee with Jesus and the guy says, "Lord, how can you allow there to be so much violence, poverty, hunger, and injustice in the world?" And Jesus says, "That's funny, I was about to ask you the same question." It's funny and it's biting, but it doesn't map perfectly onto today's story, because Jesus doesn't turn around and tell the disciples to do themselves exactly what they had asked him to do. He instead asks them to do something different and harder. The disciples imagined a political revolution in Israel; Jesus assigns them the task of witnessing to the beauty and power of his love to the ends of the earth. But first, they have to do something maybe even harder than that—they have to wait.

Specifically, they have to wait for the Holy Spirit. It's a ten day wait until the Holy Spirit comes upon them at Pentecost, which we'll mark next Sunday. And as they wait, the liturgical calendar makes us wait, as well. We, like they, have this ten day period of emptiness, of in-between-ness, of—well—waiting. Jesus is gone and the Holy spirit hasn't come yet. We're on a threshold, in a liminal place. The old is passing away

and the new is not yet fully arrived. And that must be hardest place for us, in our culture, to be.

We know how to innovate and we know how to carry on with what works, but we don't know how to wait, how to sit and discern in the waiting. Take it from the parent of a toddler. But also take it from a guy who lost half his Friday waiting for CTA trains and busses. Or from your own life, waiting for the doctor's office to call with the test results; waiting for the teenager to come home; the college student to call; the results of the interview for a new job. Or the situations where we aren't sure whether we're supposed to be waiting or to be moving: when it seems that the old way is fading, but the new has not yet begun even to glimmer on the horizon.

The disciples have to wait, and they have the advantage over us because they are told when they've hit that spot, the empty in-between time of waiting and discerning. We're unlikely, in the hurly-burly of life, to be told quite so clearly that it's time to pause. And so the church year has these moments built in where we have to wait—Advent and Ascensiontide being the two most obvious ones. They are training in a spiritual skill that we almost certainly don't have but much more certainly need.

I'd like just to highlight two things about the way the disciples wait, as parts of a model for our faithful waiting, whatever movement of God it is that we are waiting for. First, note that they wait in prayer. In Luke's words, they "were constantly devoting themselves to prayer." Many Episcopalians are intimidated by the thought of prayer that isn't written down for us. To which I say, start with the ones that are written down. Grab one of those red Books of Common Prayer in the pews and take it home and give me a call if you don't know how to use it and then sit down and pray however you can. And keep doing it, badly or beautifully, until your waiting becomes itself a kind of prayer.

And second, none of the disciples waited alone. They were gathered together in one place, with certain women and Jesus' brothers. There is a deep wisdom in this: faithful waiting is something that is done together. Tell us, tell someone, about what you think you're waiting for, about what it's like to wait for it, about the kinds of prayer that are sustaining you. Patience is communal. Discernment, which is the best case scenario for waiting, is communal. Faithful waiting gathers a community around it, to listen, to sit, to pray, to watch.

So, what might you be waiting for? What might God be calling you to wait for? Don't rush past the waiting. Tell us about it. Invite us to sit with you in your patience and prayer. The new is coming, and we want to be with you when it arrives.