

Message for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year A (5/24/20)

Acts 1:[4-5] 6-14

John 17:1-11

On Thursday, the church commemorated the Ascension of Our Lord. At the end of the Gospel of Luke, and again at the beginning of the book of Acts, the evangelist reports that the risen Christ is taken up into heaven, leaving the disciples behind to await their empowerment by the Holy Spirit for the ongoing work of God's kingdom come on Earth as in heaven.

The Ascension is probably the least appreciated of all the festival days. I'll admit that I don't usually give it much thought. Why do you suppose that we're reluctant to count the Ascension among the key episodes in Jesus' story? I suspect it's because it sounds so incredible to the modern ear. Maybe we're a little embarrassed by the image of Jesus blasting off into heaven, afraid that it might sound foolish and thus undermine our credibility.

But if that's the case, then we ought to acknowledge that the Ascension is no more foolish than the notion that divinity would take on flesh in an infant child, that he would offer his very life to us in simple meal fellowship, that he would rise from death in order to grant us the hope of eternal life, that he would dare to entrust the future of God's beloved world to such fickle beings as the first disciples, as us. The entirety of Jesus' story is foolish; nevertheless we cling to it as wisdom and power.¹

So, where is the wisdom and power in the account of the Ascension? It's important to bear in mind that ancient people did not have a modern grasp of Earth's place in the cosmos; they understood the universe in simpler terms. If this

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:18-25.

plane of existence is the land of the living, the realm of God's creation, then "up" is the realm of the divine, the origin of everything that is "of God," and "down" is the place of the dead. Hence, Jesus "descended to the dead," then "ascended into heaven," according to the Creed. The Ascension, in other words, is the means by which the gospel storyteller affirms that in the end Christ is "seated at the right hand of the Father," that he and the Father are "one," to borrow the language of our Gospel from John.

But, if Jesus finally returns to God, if his bodily appearances in resurrection eventually come to an end, then what does that mean for the disciples? If he has gone up, then how can he remain "with them always, to the end of the age"?² The reformer John Calvin conceived of the Ascension as the moment when Jesus' power is "diffused and spread beyond the bounds of heaven and earth."³ That is, if he is nowhere in particular, then he can be everywhere at once; the ascended Christ is wherever the love of God becomes incarnate. He is like living water warmed by the sun and rising as vapor, then condensing again and raining down where it may.

That's all well and good for Jesus; he gets to return to his origin at the heart of the divine life. The disciples aren't as fortunate. Prior to his ascension, the risen Christ orders the disciples "not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father." In the version at the end of Luke, Jesus says, "Stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."⁴ *Stay here. Wait. I'm going to take the ride of my life, but y'all just sit tight and keep an eye on things, would you?*

² Matthew 28:20.

³ As cited by Sean A. White, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2, 524.

⁴ 24:49.

The disciples obediently return to the upper room and devote themselves to prayer in anticipation of the Holy Spirit's arrival. Yet, how difficult it must be to wait, to dwell in an in-between time without knowing the end date! The disciples' desire for clarity emerges in their anxious questioning: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" to which Jesus responds, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." *Great. So, we'll just have to wait, to isolate together for however long it takes to reach the next stage of our life together.*

Does that sound familiar?

Why do you think it's so hard to wait? Why do we go stir-crazy and immediately start looking ahead to what comes next? Could it be that waiting undermines the illusion of our self-sufficiency? We like to imagine that we are the masters of our own circumstances, but having to wait implies that some things are beyond our control.

Let me suggest, however, that there is grace in this command of Jesus to stay and wait. As Sean White puts it, the invitation to wait "beckons us beyond the anxiety of not knowing what is next into the divinely established purpose of life in the meantime."⁵ In other words, life in the in-between isn't just a holding pattern; we're not just being delayed against our will. If the first disciples are any example, the interim is a time to devote ourselves to prayer, that is, in the words of Rabbi

⁵ 520.

Abraham Heschel, to “clarify our hopes and intentions... to discover our true aspirations”⁶ in light of the God-given privilege of being alive.

And, dwelling in the discomfort of the interim promises the kind of discovery that awaits the first disciples at Pentecost. Letting go of the urge to control everything in our lives will allow the Spirit to arrive on her terms, together with the gifts she has to offer. Waiting carves out a space in time for God to fill with what we really need.

This is the wisdom of Jan Richardson’s poem entitled “Stay,” an excerpt of which I offer by way of conclusion: “I know how your mind / rushes ahead, / trying to fathom / what could follow this. / What will you do, / where will you go, / how will you live? ...For now, / hear me when I say / all you need to do / is to still yourself, / is to turn toward one another, / is to stay. / Wait / and see what comes / to fill / the gaping hole / in your chest. / ...Wait for it. / Still yourself. / Stay.”⁷

⁶ As cited by Rolf Jacobson, “Prayer and Quarantine,” <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5434>.

⁷ *The Cure for Sorrow*, 133-4.