

Sermon, Ascension Sunday  
 May 4, 2008  
 St. John's Episcopal Church  
 The Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde

### In-Between Time

*When they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for your to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses . . ."*  
 Acts 1:11

*Then Jesus 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 to these things. I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed from power from on high." Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.*

Luke 24:44-53

One of my favorite poems, which I have read in its entirety from this pulpit, is called "Imperatives" by Kathleen Norris. Inspired by Emily Dickinson, who once said that "consider the lilies" was the only commandment she ever obeyed, Norris read the gospels in search of Jesus' other imperatives, or commands, sprinkled throughout his teachings. These are the things that Jesus told us to do—not to think about or to debate among ourselves, but to *do*. Things like: *Look the birds; consider the lilies; stretch out your hand; enter by the narrow gate; do not be anxious; rise; love; forgive.*

To that list of commands we could add another, taken from today's text: *stay here*. Stay here until you have been clothed with power from on high. That it to say, stay where you are until you receive the clarity, direction, and power that you need to move forward. You don't have that clarity, direction and power yet. You need them, but you don't yet have them. Until you do, stay put.

The context for this command is the luminous, almost magical time shortly after the resurrection when Jesus had a way of appearing or showing up with and among his disciples. They were in an upper room, or on the road to Emmaus, or on the shores of Lake Galilee, and suddenly there he was. It wasn't as if he hadn't died, but he was with them nonetheless. He was present, assuring them, against all evidence to the contrary, that God was in charge and all was well.

Then, as the story is told today, Jesus appeared to them in this way one last time. What he tells them is what you just heard: I'm leaving you. This phase of our relationship is ending, and another will soon begin. Soon I will give you all that you need and more. You will receive power from the Holy Spirit, and you will be my witnesses to the end of the earth. So *stay here* in the city until you have been clothed from power from on high.

At its simplest level, the command is to wait. But it's not like waiting for dinner or for a movie to begin, or any other experience of waiting for things that we fully expect to happen. This is waiting for the things beyond our reach, those things that exceed our capacity to make happen and are far from inevitable. It is waiting for what we cannot as

yet see or even be certain exist at all. To make it even harder, we're waiting for this new thing while at the same time something familiar and even precious to us is ending. There we are—in the in-between time. It can be unsettling, as we feel the past slipping away while the future remains unclear. While the scriptures assure us that the disciples were joyful in their period of waiting (which frankly, I have a hard time believing), for most of us the in-between time is anything but easy.

The waiting can take many forms. Maybe we're wrestling with an urgent question that's really bothering us inside or causing conflict with others, but it isn't one that we can easily resolve. Answers to urgent questions rarely come easily or quickly, no matter how hard we seek them. Thus we have no choice but to live with difficult questions for however long it takes for clarity to emerge.

We may find ourselves waiting because there is a task before us that requires skills or capacities we don't have. Harder still, the work may require a real inner change in us, a change in attitude more costly than we're prepared to make. Ronald Heifetz, a professor at the Kennedy School of Government, calls this “the perils of adaptive change.”<sup>1</sup> “Leadership would be a safe undertaking,” he writes, “if your organizations and communities only faced problems for which they already knew the solutions... But there are a whole host of problems beyond their capacity to solve. Thus they are not amenable to authoritative expertise or standard operating procedures. We call these adaptive challenges because they require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments in numerous places. Without learning new ways—changing attitudes, values, and behaviors—people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment.”<sup>2</sup> Working for adaptive change involves a lot of internal waiting, as we bump up against the limits of our current repertoire of skills and attitudes and fail in our efforts to try harder with what no longer works.

Perhaps we're waiting because we can't see. I was driving to Little Falls, Minnesota on Friday afternoon to attend a meeting. You may recall that on Friday, it rained a lot. Well, the further north I traveled, the harder it rained. At one point I had to pull over and wait out the storm, because I couldn't see past my windshield. Not being able to see the road ahead is unnerving, particularly when other people keep asking us what's up ahead, and we don't have an answer for them, because we don't have it yet for ourselves. A few years ago, a member of St. John's, then a high school senior, said to us, all the adults in her life wanting to make conversation, “Please don't ask me anymore where I'm going to college next year. I don't know.” It was hard for her not to know, and we didn't make any easier every time we brought up the subject.

How, then, to live gracefully in a time of waiting? What are the spiritual challenges and opportunities of such a time? We spend a lot of time waiting; in some ways, I suppose, we're always waiting for something that lies beyond us. So how can we live the waiting time well, and not simply wish it away or attempt to rush through it as fast as we can? What does it look like to cultivate a spirit of “passionate patience,” to borrow of phrase from the Archbishop of Canterbury, that allows us to live grounded in where we are right now, and ready to move toward the future when it beckons?

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Heifetz and Ronald Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

I'm going to divide the remainder of what I have to say this morning into two categories: the temptations to resist in a time of waiting—the attitudes and behaviors that are *not* helpful—and the practices to cultivate—the attitudes and behaviors that do help in an unsettling time. I confess that I had an easier time with the first category. I know a lot about the things that aren't helpful, because I so easily succumb to them. It takes a lot more effort to think about, and to practice, the things that serve us well in uncertain times.

The first, and perhaps greatest temptation in a waiting time is to complain, and in our complaining to find fault with those whom we believe are in some way be responsible for the condition that we're in or should be the ones making the greatest effort to change it. I'm not saying that there aren't legitimate things to complain about. But the problem with complaining is that it's so easy and it accomplishes nothing. As someone once said to me, it takes absolutely no effort, not one bit of creativity or energy, to be negative. To be positive, however, to remain hopeful, committed and engaged, takes effort. But ask yourself: with whom would you rather spend time with when things are hard—with those who complain and blame, or with those who cheerfully roll up their sleeves and offer to help?

So part of cultivating a spirit of passionate patience in times of waiting involves a conscious choice not to whine about it. The former presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, Frank Griswold, once asked a graduating class of seminarians, about to become priest in the church, "How will you deport yourself as a leader in a time when there is a great deal of murmuring and complaining, not simply in the life of the church, but also in the life of our society as well?" If we, as ministers of the gospel, are given to murmuring," he said, "it is very hard for us to speak a word of encouragement, a word of hope, to those we are called to serve."<sup>3</sup> His words speak not only to rising priests, but to all of us in any situation where complaining and blaming abound, but what is most needed, like water on parched soil, are words of hope and encouragement.

Another temptation of a waiting time is to get caught in the kind of thinking that says to us we must either move full steam ahead, even when we're not ready and don't know where we're, or give up entirely, that is to say, to go completely passive and do nothing. The dangers of either extreme are clear enough. How many decisions made in the heat of urgency are ones that we now regret? I have learned the hard way to be suspicious of urgency, when I feel or others say that a decision must be made *now*; action must be taken *now*. Of course there are times when we must take action. But far too often, particularly in a culture that values little more than it does speed, we rush ahead too soon. And if we can't act, then we're tempted to throw up our hands and give up completely. Passivity is just the other side of compulsion, you know, born of the assumption that if we can't do everything, we might as well do nothing.

One way to cultivate passionate patience, and the antidote to our tendency to live at the extremes, is to practice a posture of poised readiness. Animals in the wild give us the most compelling image of being completely still, yet poised to move when the time is right. Or we might think of athletes preparing for a competition that is months away. They can't rush ahead in their training without risk of injury, but on the other hand, if they do nothing, they won't be prepared when the time comes. What they do is to train

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<sup>3</sup> Frank T. Griswold, "The 2004 Commencement Address," *The Virginia Seminary Journal* (Summer, 2004), 13.

methodically and slowly, building up their capacity over time in order to compete at full strength when the time comes. In a similar way, the question for us in the time of waiting is, “what can we do now, to use the time well? What skills can we hone; what knowledge can we master; what relationships can we forge to ready ourselves when the time comes to act?”

A third, and for today final, temptation for us in the waiting time is to imagine that our real lives will begin when the waiting is over. How many times do we say that to ourselves or to others, “I can’t wait for *this*—whatever *this* is—to be over so that my life can begin.” But what if *this* is your life? What if where you and I are right now, waiting in between what is ending and what is yet to be, is our life?

If this is our life, then there’s no excuse for not living it to the best of our ability. If this is our life, then there’s no reason not to love and to give, no matter how inadequate we feel. During our staff meeting last week as we pondered the story of Jesus’ departure from his disciples, Michele Morgan made the observation that when Jesus left, it meant that the disciples needed to be Jesus in his place. By extension, then, we are the ones now to be Christ for one another. Now we all know that we can’t do or be enough to end the sufferings and sorrows that surround us on every side. But we can do some things, even in the time of waiting. We can love, give, and bring joy to others, as surely Christ would have us do in his name. Stay here, he said, but he didn’t say, and be a couch potato. “On this planet,” writes the Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner, “you and I are the only bodies Christ has. He has no hands to reach out to people with except our hands, no feet to go to them with except our feet, no other eyes to see them with except our eyes, no other faces to show them his love.”

In-between time can be awkward, stressful, and self-absorbing, and it is rarely a time that we gladly choose. But if it’s the time that we’re in, then it’s the only time we have. It’s not the ideal condition in which to live and to love, but there’s nothing to be gained by complaining about that, or by trying to rush past where we are, or by imagining that real life begins sometime else. This is it. This is our life. What does cultivating a passionate patience look like for you and me, here and now? And what’s to stop us, really, from living and loving fully, in an in-between time?