

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Robert Alexander
“The Waiting Game”
Isaiah 40: 28-31, Actos 1: 6-14
7th Sunday of Easter
May 28, 2017

This past Thursday – 40 days after Easter – the church celebrated the Ascension of Jesus Christ. Our New Testament reading this morning is the account of that story by the Physician Luke who also wrote the Gospel According to Luke. Luke and Acts are essentially a 2-Volume set which tell the story of God’s Love for the world in Jesus Christ and then the spreading of that Good News by the followers of Jesus who were given power by the Holy Spirit of God to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. Luke ends Volume 1 and begins Volume 2 with the Ascension of Jesus. The ascension at the end of Luke is the culmination of the defeat of the powers of sin and death in the resurrection. The ascension at the beginning of Acts is the signal to the church that the Spirit of God is about to be poured out into the women and men who will live in that same resurrection power and usher in the Kingdom of God.

Read Acts 1:6-14

We do a lot of waiting don’t we? We wait in traffic, wait in line at the grocery or in a restaurant, wait for summer, wait in traffic, wait to see the doctor or dentist or counselor, wait to receive a test result, wait in traffic, wait to hear back from that school or from that employer or from that attorney, wait for someone to arrive home safely. Wait! Wait! Wait! Sometimes it seems like that is all we do. I don’t really like to wait. Do you? I don’t know anyone who does. And I think that our society is getting worse about it. We are getting more and more impatient. We want quick results, instant gratification, faster downloads, and immediate responses.

Can you imagine being one of the disciples on that hillside...being told by Jesus that “the timing of everything is in God’s hands. You’re going to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and you are going to be given a new kind of power so that you can be my witnesses to the ends of the earth!” And then suddenly Jesus ascended in a cloud until he was out of their sight. There was no time to ask for clarification. No opportunity for Q&A. No way to check Jesus’ status. No way to send a text. No tracking number. No way to Ping Jesus to see if he was online!

They stood there “gazing up toward heaven” as the text reads, and suddenly two angels were standing there with them asking them, “Why are you standing here looking up into heaven? He’ll come back in the same way he left. Don’t worry!”

Talk about an unsatisfying response! What could they do? Well - they went back to Jerusalem and they went up into an upper room where they had been staying – and they waited. But they didn’t just sit around and twiddle their thumbs or navel gaze...the followers of Jesus, Luke tells us, “constantly devoted themselves to prayer.” As they waited they spent time in prayer and in worship.

You see...they had experienced, in the previous few years with Jesus, the way that heaven and earth had come together in him, and how the Kingdom of God had been revealed in the one who they called the Messiah. And after experiencing the resurrection they must have felt both thrilled and excited and confused. “Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?” They had asked. But they had misunderstood what God was doing in them and in the world. Their purpose was not to be

prestigious leaders in a restored kingdom on earth but rather to take the good news of God's love and proclaim it far and wide. Their job was to wait for God's power to be given to them and then to bear witness to the mighty acts of God and to the deep love of God that they had experienced in Jesus Christ. So they waited and they prayed and they worshipped. They gathered in community and devoted themselves to prayer. It is what we do every Sunday when we gather in this space. It is what we do when we gather with our families or our friends to sing and pray and read scripture and help one another stay focused on the things of God and stay strong in our faith!

N.T. Wright describes how in prayer and worship we fellowship together in God's space. When we worship, we are, in a sense, transported to that realm where God reigns.ⁱ Not that God doesn't reign over all and in all places, but when we worship, we let down our guard and we humble ourselves before God and we experience the presence and the power and the peace of God in a very intentional and intimate way. Maybe prayer does satisfy our need for instant gratification! We can communicate with God anytime and from anywhere!

The trouble is that we are often waiting to get what we want rather than waiting for what God wants. We wait to have our desires fulfilled rather than "waiting upon the Lord" as the prophet Isaiah invites us to do. The prophet told God's people that The Lord is the one true God – not the powerless idols that they saw around them while they were in exile in Babylon. Isaiah told them not to lose heart or to lose faith, but rather to give themselves - body, mind, and spirit - to the ways of God. In the words of Paul Hanson, "To those few who surrender their lives to the everlasting God, the prophet has concluding words of encouragement that surpass all the cheap promises of the idol market: The one who does not grow weary strengthens the powerless."ⁱⁱ These words were true for the Israelites, they were true for the disciples in Jerusalem, and they are true for you and me. When our attention, our focus, our heart is on the things of God rather than on our own wants, our waiting is no burden at all and we trust that God's timing is right!

10 days later, according to tradition, those disciples, still gathered for prayer and worship, experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus on the Day of Pentecost. They were transformed by the power of God and the world has never been the same. (More about that next week on Pentecost Sunday).

The Spirit is in the world – and in us – and we are still being transformed by God's power. Our hearts and our wills are still being shaped and turned so that our inclination is to bear witness with our whole selves to the wonder and splendor of God's amazing love and grace. When we remain focused on self – turned inward – we are crippled and unable to experience the freedom that Christ came to give. Turned inward our lives are darkened by greed and selfishness. God's love and grace move us out into the light where we can breathe fresh air, participate in the love of God and neighbor, and share life with all – regardless of what they look like, smell like, or talk like. When we *wait upon the Lord*, we are given the strength and the love to rise up on wings as eagles and serve the purposes of the one true God who gives life to all!

I know that Father's Day is still a few weeks out, but I'll be in Nicaragua on Father's Day so I would like to honor my dad today by sharing a brief story of how I think all this waiting on the Lord stuff worked in his life.

Back in the late 60's we lived in Gastonia and dad was a Presbyterian Minister who was starting a new church. He was asked to serve as a chaplain with the Gastonia Association of Retarded Citizens. He met with parents of children with Special Needs in a support group type setting and encouraged them in

the midst of the daily challenges they faced. That experience planted a seed in my dad's heart. He prayed about it for a long time and wrestled with this new sense of call to minister to the needs of adults with developmental disabilities. As he prayed and worshipped and studied scripture he became convinced that God wanted him to show God's love to this specific population of people. He was frustrated that there didn't seem to be any interest on the part of the church to serve those who were differently abled. He remembered the call of Jesus in Matthew 25 to serve the "least of these" and he could not think of any other group that was more deserving of love and compassion and care. With 3 young children, a mortgage, and a lot of faith, he left the pastorate, moved us all to Boone and worked in a specialized ministry serving families in the 32 western counties of North Carolina. Fortunately there was money in the Federal Budget to pay him for this work so that he could provide for his family. That eventually led to a long career as the director of a nonprofit facility that served adults with special needs and helped them gain education, job skills, and independence that gave them more freedom and a sense of self-worth in a world that so often had counted them as worthless. For my dad, waiting upon the Lord led to a life of service where he had the opportunity to love a group of individuals and families that are often overlooked and forgotten. It wasn't an easy career choice but I don't think he ever regretted it.

Today, May 28th, according to our Presbyterian denominational calendar, is Disability Inclusion Sunday. Carol Brown is the Moderator of the Presbyterians for Disability Concerns (PDC). She says that every Sunday should be Disability Inclusion Sunday. "Oftentimes, people with disabilities are overlooked. They should be looked at as gifts and not be pitied. The disability doesn't define them. They are a person," she said. "I have a son with Down syndrome. He is a unique individual who is made in God's image. Quite often folks with disabilities are looked on with pity or in need of charity. But that's not what we are about. We are about including everyone in the life of the church."

This past week I attended a concert at Hough High School. At one point in the concert, the band director, Mr. Carrington, described how he had been introduced last year to an organization called United Sound, Inc. This organization connects students with special needs with students who are in band and orchestra, giving them an experience playing an instrument with a group. The band and the orchestra each performed one piece during their concert with the United Sound student participants. As I listened, I watched the students interact with one another in a beautiful way. The band and orchestra members helped count through the music (1,2,3,4). They pointed to where they were on the sheet music so the students wouldn't get lost. They helped them find the right fingering or position of a slide or a bow. They welcomed them and helped them feel a part of the band community. That is what we are called to do as a community of faith – make space for everyone in the church and help them become a part of the beautiful music that God has given us to play together. I learned a lot about this from my dad and from those students who work with United Sound. We are called to focus our lives on others and welcome them into the community where they find their place. Watch this short promo video about United Sound.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RdxFGSx8IQ>

Waiting is difficult...especially when we are only focused on ourselves, waiting on something that we want...the healing that never seems to come, the promotion that never happens, the apology that is never given, the acceptance letter or invitation that never arrives. When we can only focus on that, we become impatient, angry, and bitter. That kind of waiting game makes us take the wrong kind of action – taking matters into our own hands and focusing on things other than the things of God. Turned inward we lose perspective, lose hope, and lose faith.

But waiting upon the Lord is different...it isn't a game and it isn't passive. It invites us to enter the realm of God through prayer and worship. We enter the space of God with all our hopes and dreams and

fears and worries and lay them before God and have them all shaped and transformed by the love and grace of God.

Henri Nouwen once wrote that “The spiritual life is a gift. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit, who lifts us up into the kingdom of God’s love. But to say that being lifted up into the kingdom of love is a divine gift does not mean that we wait passively until the gift is offered to us. Jesus tells us to set our hearts on the kingdom. Setting our hearts on something involves not only serious aspiration but also strong determination. A spiritual life requires human effort.... Through a spiritual discipline we prevent the world from filling our lives to such an extent that there is no place left to listen. A spiritual discipline sets us free to pray or, to say it better, allows the Spirit of God to pray in us.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And that prayer leads to faithful discipleship. Strengthened by the God who created us and calls us to be faithful witnesses of God’s love to the ends of the earth, we go, beyond ourselves, seeking to serve the needs of others. God equips God’s people to serve others in the name of Jesus Christ and to offer life - bringing hope to the hopeless, strength to the weary, and freedom to the oppressed. This was Jesus’ mission and we are invited to share in it.

Today we recognize one group of people out of many in our congregation who serve others – our Stephen Ministers. They share themselves unselfishly to walk alongside those who may appreciate a companion along a difficult part of their journey. Later in the (11 a.m.) service we will commission nine new Stephen Ministers. If you are going through a difficult time I encourage you to find a Stephen Leader who can match you with a Stephen Minister to give you some support and encouragement. I suspect they can also help us learn how to “Wait upon the Lord.”

Friends, in our own upper rooms as we wait for the Spirit to move us...to motivate us...to empower us, may we remember that the Spirit has already come and that we are called to bear witness to the good news of God’s love for all the world. May our waiting not be a game that becomes an excuse for selfish action, or inaction, or apathy but rather a means to position ourselves directly in the center of God’s loving and gracious will. Whenever you find yourself waiting this next week – consider that it may be time to pray. And when in your praying the Spirit moves – know that it is time to participate in the work of God!

To God be the Glory! Amen.

ⁱ N.T. Wright. Acts for Everyone. WJK. P. 15

ⁱⁱ Paul Hanson, Interpretation: Isaiah 40-66. WJK. 1995. P. 31

ⁱⁱⁱ Henri J. Nouwen, from Circles of Love, ed. John Garvey (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990), p. 41.