

“What to Do in the ‘Between Time?’”

Acts 1: 6 – 14

May 28, 2017

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What do we do in the ‘between time’?

If you were to glance at the church calendar, you would notice that that’s where we find ourselves today; with one foot planted in the Easter season, but not planted firmly because the other foot is raised and ready to step into the season of Pentecost. Yes, we are leaving those fifty days of ‘Alleluia!’ to a time of the movement of the Spirit. Next week, wind and fire and a babbling of those gathered that those on the outside listening think they are drunk even though it’s still early in the morning! But we are not there yet. Today, we are in the ‘between time’.

In today’s story from Acts we find the disciples there, in the between time, and it’s almost comical.

First Jesus died and was gone, then Jesus returned, and there was such excitement. “Now are you going to restore the kingdom of Israel?” Still thinking in military terms, the conquering of the Empire, the disciples are anticipating victory upon his return, a return to the Davidic kingdom, the way it was before. But no. Kingdom talk is not about military might, not something to arrive quickly but about God’s work on earth as it is in heaven. Not about the power of Empire and wealth in the world, but the power of love. Jesus answers, ‘It isn’t for you to know the time. Just wait. The Holy Spirit will transform you to be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.’ Then he was gone. Ascended into a cloud, maybe we have a picture like the good witch in the Wizard of Oz floating away in a bubble or that notion from Star Trek of being beamed up. And the disciples stood there gazing upwards. “Would you look at that! Where’d he go?!” ‘How did he do that?’ Until two men in white robes appeared beside them, saying, “Hey, why are you just standing around looking up?” which is, eerily similar to Luke’s Easter story (remember, Luke is the author of the book of Acts as well), when the women had gone to the tomb, found the stone rolled away, went in and instead of finding the body found two men in dazzling robes who asked them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

Jesus had left them again, ascended into heaven with no clear timeline of his return, only instructions that included the coming of the Holy Spirit at some time in the future. What about now? The disciples found themselves in the between time.

We know those times, we too find ourselves in those times.

Between jobs when we're not sure what the future will look like. Summertime is a 'between time' for those stepping from one grade to the next, from one school to the next, from home and high school to what lies ahead. This between time, between big life events or extraordinary times or clarity of what is going to happen, oh we've found ourselves in those between times. Sometimes we refer to it as coming back down from those mountaintop experiences of wonder to the ordinary routine of daily life. What do we do in this between time? If we go back to our reading for today, we're given a couple of suggestions.

First, we don't just stand there looking up at the sky waiting for the next mountaintop experience to happen. We come back down from the mountain just like Jesus did in the story of the transfiguration, that story when he and Peter and James and John were on the mountaintop and Jesus was suddenly glowing white and Moses and Elijah appeared and Peter wanted to stay up there and build a shrine to them but no, Jesus came down from that mountaintop experience, rolled up his sleeves and got to work.

Likewise, in today's reading, the disciples came down off the mountaintop to the valley, to the days of ordinary and routine where most of life and most of ministry happens. Those ordinary valley days. In a page from the book "That Parent's Tao Te Ching", author William Martin writes some instructions to parents about this time in the valley, this between time.

“Do not ask your children to strive for extraordinary lives. Such striving may seem admirable, but it is a way of foolishness. Help them instead find the wonder and the marvel of an ordinary life. Show them the joy of tasting tomatoes, apples and pears. Show them how to cry when pets and people die. Show them the infinite pleasure in the touch of a hand. And make the ordinary come alive for them. The extraordinary will take care of itself.”

Yes, those first disciples didn't just wait up on the mountaintop for another extraordinary event, another mountaintop experience, to happen. As if that would even be possible. They returned to the ordinary valley life where we live most of our days.

Such is the case in our individual lives and we in the church are no different. Like today, standing between two church seasons. Standing between the stories of Easter and next week's Pentecost coming of the Holy Spirit. As a people of faith, we are constantly there, that time between when Jesus was on this earth and when Jesus will return, this time of waiting, what do we do in this between time?

Next week we will celebrate the day of Pentecost as the birthday of the church and we celebrate that each year, that day when all were united by the Spirit in mission and witness, you know, that big 'wow!' event. But I wonder if in doing so we do ourselves a disservice?

If we look at the reading again, we hear of people with real names, men and women, with their own histories, with their hopes for the future, waiting. Was that the real beginning of the church, or at least the 'prequel' to the Pentecost story? In today's Feasting on the Word commentary, author Randal Mixon writes that 'there are two notable things they did while they waited; they stayed together and they prayed. Both of these activities are instructive for the church today.'

Those ordinary days of being church; we gather together as community and we open our hearts to God, doing the daily work that needs to be done while preparing ourselves for how the Spirit will empower us in our lives together.

Next week is Pentecost Sunday, for me, a mountaintop Sunday not quite as big as Easter and Christmas but still, full of celebration! Today, however, we are like that small group of disciples gathered in the upper room, forming community, offering prayers to our God, doing that ordinary valley work that we are called to be about. Continuing to be stewards, to support the church with our time, talents and financial resources even in these ordinary days.

A popular term these days in the area of spirituality is 'mindfulness'. Certainly not a new concept in religion but newly applied today; the striving to be aware of and present in each moment; to see the holy in the ordinary day, to take time to really

see the world around us and each other. It's such a refreshing practice in our days of attention diverted to cell phone screens and computer screens.

One of the gifts of walking together as church not just during the mountaintop extraordinary times but during the ordinary valley days as well is that we practice mindfulness as a community, we see in community formed, in prayers shared, in compassion extended, in hospitality offered, in grace received, that even these ordinary days of waiting are filled with the extraordinary presence of God.