

“Working While We Wait”  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, May 16, 2021

Acts 1:1-17, 21-26  
Sunday after Ascension and Seventh Sunday of Easter

The Sundays of Easter find us hearing the stories of Jesus’ appearance to the disciples after his death and resurrection. There is his meeting with two of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Jesus appears in the Upper Room to the disciples, and returns so that Doubting Thomas can see the wounds in his hands and feet. For forty days, Jesus appears in their midst. And on the fortieth day, Jesus is with his disciples for one last time before he ascends to heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father, as our older church creeds write about the Ascension.

We read in Acts 1: “While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit, not many days from now.” Jesus tells them that they will be his ‘Witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” After this, Jesus is lifted up, and a cloud takes him out of their sight.

He tells them to wait.

We know that in ten days the day of Pentecost will arrive, which in our Christian tradition is the fiftieth day after Easter. Pentecost will be celebrated next Sunday – with the liturgical colour of red, and symbols of flame – all signs that the Holy Spirit has been here and left its mark of change and new life!

Jesus asks the disciples to wait. There is something very biblical about this waiting for the Divine. The Psalms are filled with lines like, ‘Wait for God! Be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for God! (Psalm 27:14) And there is Mary, after being visited by the angel Gabriel to tell her that she would be the mother of God’s son, who had to wait for the birth to understand what that would really mean. The season of Advent is about waiting for the birth of Christ. Waiting *is* a spiritual discipline to discern the presence of the Divine in our life.

The Book of Acts opens with this narrative about waiting. And it is an uncomfortable space. You know it from your own experience – waiting for the safe arrival of a newborn baby, waiting for the cast to come off your broken foot. And for many of us this past year, waiting for the test results from your covid test; and now, with more hopeful signals with increased numbers of vaccinations, we wait for the time when we can gather without restrictions with our families and our friends; waiting for the hugs and closeness we are missing.

And while the disciples were waiting, they didn’t have a clue what to do next. Jesus left them with a pretty tall order – to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. How do you begin work on that? The disciples were in this awkward ‘in-between’ time after Jesus had left and before the arrival of the Holy Spirit. What were they supposed to do

while they waited? So, in the absence of any kind of a plan, they resorted to what they did know how to do – Nominations! Something every church can do in their sleep!

As you may remember, there were originally 12 disciples. Judas Iscariot was the disciple who betrayed Jesus, leading Pilate’s soldiers to arrest Jesus. Jesus would be tried by Pilate, and then killed by crucifixion on a cross. Judas would later die a grievous death, leaving only 11 disciples. Peter tells the eleven that they should take this time now to elect another to their group. The number twelve was important because there were 12 disciples to represent the 12 tribes of Israel. Peter quotes from the psalms the references to Judas’ death, ‘Let his homestead become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it; and ‘Let another take his position of overseer’.

Peter decides that *this* is the time to have an election to select the 12<sup>th</sup> disciple. Of the 120 people gathered in that upper room, two names will surface – Matthias, and Barsabbas, also known as Justus. There is prayer, and then a casting of lots, and Matthias is chosen. But when Jesus asks you to ‘wait’ for the Holy Spirit, is this the time to work on nominations? The Holy Spirit is not into organizational charts.

The disciples, in a time when Jesus had asked them to wait for the Holy Spirit, took things into their own hands and turned away from this time of waiting, and filled it with being busy, like nominations. When we don’t know where we’re going, it is far too easy to fill our time with the things that we ‘do know’, that we have control over. And yet here, at the beginning of the Book of Acts, is this strong message, from Jesus himself, to wait. The hardest work *is* the waiting when we’re in the ‘in-between’ of where we’ve been and where we’re going.

Some call the Book of Acts by another name – the Acts of the Holy Spirit. And the work of the Holy Spirit is to disrupt, change, stir up what is too controlled, to set in one’s ways, in order to bring new life, new direction, new energy. Willie James Jennings sheds light on the rather jaded way we can approach the Book of Acts, treating it more as a historical document than a template for change. Jennings writes, “Acts gets interpreted as the historical foundation of the church’s life, as if Acts reveals the marble, stone, brick and mortar of ecclesial existence ... the purpose of which is to show us the earlier forms of church life, religious ritual, or theology ... the Book of Acts becomes an artifact.”<sup>1</sup>

But rather, the Book of Acts is a living document, infused by the imprint of the Holy Spirit as it visited a group of people in a set time. That imprint didn’t remain there in a fossilized state – but is very much wanting to be present today, in the church, at this time. Susan Beaumont writes, “when we let go of our obsessions with right order and proper channels. ... When we let go of our need to feel in control of what happens next, remarkable things begin to occur.”<sup>2</sup>

Some theologians have wondered if the eleven disciples, in their inability to wait as Jesus had asked them to, had rushed the process of finding the twelfth disciple, when in fact, the Holy Spirit was already at work setting things in motion to bring on the newest member of the team.

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<sup>1</sup> Willie James Jennings, *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going: Leading in a Liminal Season* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 147.

Jesus said, wait a few days, just wait.  
But it's hard to just wait, the disciples said.  
Peter suggested,  
Let's 'fix' something while we're waiting.

So, they quoted the right Psalms  
and spent days in discussion  
and cast lots to add the twelfth name.

But the Spirit thought otherwise.

Regardless of their efforts,  
the best laid plans of mice and men  
would gather dust.  
For the Spirit was, in that very moment,  
preparing the one who would become the catalyst,  
the one who would be, in a very divine way,  
the Spirit's choice for twelfth.

Not Mathias.

But Paul,  
who even then mounting on horseback,  
sword in hand,  
to persecute the very ones  
he would soon call his own,

this Paul, would be touched,  
and shockingly called  
to bear witness to all,  
to the ends of the earth.

Come, Holy Spirit, come!

Thanks be to God. Amen.