

Ascension 2019

Acts 1:1-11

Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 24:49-53

Big narratives present many challenges, not the least being how to gracefully usher a lead character from the story. Entrances are easier than exits. The impression of Jesus' literal ascension into thin air certainly grabs one's attention and literally stupifies. Whether we receive it as factual mystery or figurative hyperbole the ascension narrative is certainly a showstopper. Even Luke's addition of two angels described as men in white offering explanation and grounding for the astonished disciples seem mere ornamentation completely eclipsed by the star's dramatic leave-taking.

These upward, outward dimensions of the story are certainly compelling. But there's another dimension that appears in all of the readings gathered in our lectionary to celebrate the event. In Acts, it's where the apostles are told by Jesus, "You must wait for the promise ... about which you have heard me speak." Jesus goes on to say that they "will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon [them]." In the letter to Ephesus, Paul prays that "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ may give [the believers at Ephesus] the spiritual powers of wisdom and vision. ... I pray that your inward eyes may be illumined," continues the apostle, "so that you may know what is the hope to which [God] calls you, what the wealth and glory of the share [God] offers you ... and how vast the resources of [God's] power open to us who trust in [God]." And lastly, in the gospel, Jesus says to the disciples "I am sending upon you ... (the) promised gift; so stay here in this city until you are armed with the power from above." And then he departed from them.

So while our attention is centered upon Jesus' leaving, upon what has gone away, every scriptural text appointed reminds us that a countervailing dynamic is present in significant measure. The overwhelming emphasis of these narratives of the ascension event dwell not upon what's gone away, but upon what's given and what's yet to be received.

It's become quite common in many circles of our culture to promote a celebration of abundance over anxiety about scarcity. The extremes in this trope neglect attention to the place where we most often find ourselves, especially within the church—which is to say neither confident of abundance nor paralyzed by scarcity, just muddling along. There's little acknowledgement of or encouragement to the patience and fortitude demanded of waiting. In a culture addicted to the now, pushed to the brink and too often propelled over all the boundaries that maintain order in society, we live in an age and climate wherein material goods quite literally materialize in same-day delivery, unbridled rage over mere trivialities can result in death, and matters of ultimate consequence, including statehood and global diplomacy are condensed to 280 characters.

The disciples certainly exhibited no patience for waiting. They wanted to know of Jesus when the realm of God would be established and when they might expect to get their share of the great reward. Like innocent children in their impatience, they badger Jesus with their insistent how-much-farther-do-we-have-to-go-before-we-get-there? In the thousands of years transpired since, that anticipatory anxiety has only amplified.

“You must wait,” said Jesus. It's a painful word for us to hear in our hurry-up world. We must wait to receive, wait for the call, wait for the promise, wait to be filled,

wait to be fulfilled. It's a painful word to hear in the church just now, beset as we are by anxieties over the unknown future of every parish, diocese, communion, even of Christian faith itself. It's very suspect, this waiting. It feels suspiciously like wasting time.

But it's the parting word. It's the last instruction. It's the one we just don't want to hear. We don't want to hear it, for it suggests that we're not in control of our destiny, that we're not exercising responsible control over our lives. And that's the whole point of it, I suspect. Jesus' final word is an everlasting reminder that our call is now and always has been a call to wait. That's not to say that we're called to passivity. Waiting demands much of us, a special kind of attention, a particular brand of attentiveness. The word "wait" is itself derived from the word "watch," and is actually defined as "to stay or remain in expectation."

Waiting, then, demands the cultivation of a discipline that values intrepid devotion and dedicated mindfulness. Waiting well is what Friedrich Nietzsche described as "a long obedience in the same direction." The essential thing 'in heaven and earth,' wrote Nietzsche, "is... that there should be a long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living."<sup>1</sup>

So it is that a vocation to Christian discipleship isn't a thing once-delivered. Christian discipleship is a gradual, life-long waiting and a perpetual receiving. As they came away from their astonishment, and made their way back to the city, surely the disciples were painfully aware of that sickening lightness, that horrible sense of the void that surrounded their sudden loss. The Ascension was a resounding reminder of their

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<sup>1</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil*, Chapter 5

powerlessness, their helplessness, the quintessential *fait accompli*, and it very likely knocked the breath out of them—and all their pretenses, too. Somewhere in their numbness, it came to them as it comes to us: in their overwhelming loss there was truly nothing they could do. In that awareness they received the gift of the Ascension: the gift of humility. The gift of humility necessary to waiting, open to receiving. Humility: the prerequisite to Pentecost.

Crucifixion. Resurrection. Easter. Ascension. A sequence of humbling, ego-crushing lessons in human powerlessness. A sequence of experiences leading to the realization that there was nothing any of them could do, nothing any of us can do, except to wait as we've been told—to pursue that long obedience in the same direction even unto eternity and the ultimate coming of God. AMEN.

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