

Waiting

The Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 16, 2021

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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Jesus prayed for his disciples, saying, "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth." John 17:11b-19

“Wait.”

“Wait ... for the promise of the Father ... [for] you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” We heard Jesus give this instruction to his disciples this past Thursday, Ascension Day. “Wait ... for the promise of the Father ...” And then “... as they were watching, [Jesus] was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” And then, after that, the waiting. Waiting for the promise of the Father. Waiting for the Holy Spirit.

The waiting of which Jesus spoke before his Ascension clearly has a temporal meaning and is measurable: *‘not many days from now ... you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’* You and I now wait with those first believers for the “...sound like the rush of a violent wind ... the tongues of fire ... one resting on each of them.” (Acts 2) The ecstasy. The empowering. The witnessing. The conversions.

But for now, the waiting.

With our benefit of hindsight, we now know *how* they were to be baptized by the Spirit and *when*. But think for a moment of all the startling reversals that those followers of Jesus had already absorbed in the course of only a few months: the hope of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the shattering of everything by way of the passion and death of Jesus, the shocking good news and implications of his resurrection, barely comprehended when he ascended.

With all of this as backstory, Jesus commands them to wait.

Some of us may find a connection point with those disciples by way of our own present experience of time during the pandemic. So many changes, reversals, and uncertainties. And now we are arguably waiting, or still waiting. Waiting and wondering if we dare hope for better times ahead. And if better times ahead, how will they differ from what we’ve known before? How if at all will we recognize the Holy Spirit in whatever lies ahead?

The author Jean Shinoda-Bolen contemplates the human predicament when we are “...over the threshold but not through to the other side.... you're neither who you used to be before you got into this transition, nor have you crossed over that threshold to where you will be settled next.... You don't know whether it is the ending or the beginning. You don't know whether it is a womb or a tomb...”¹

The waiting of which Jesus spoke before his Ascension extends beyond that time and place to seasons of change and the unknown in which any of us may find ourselves, at any time. In addition, the waiting of which Jesus spoke can only be fully understood in the context of ancient notions of prayer. “I wait for your salvation, O Lord.” (Genesis 49:18) So prays the patriarch Israel, in the midst of his long address to his family at the end of his life. Generations later, the Psalmist wrote: “Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him.” (Ps. 37:7)

Waiting in faith and prayer is not merely the passing of time in anticipation of some event. Waiting in faith and prayer opens the heart, acknowledges one's mortality and folly, recognizes one's utter reliance on God. Waiting in faith and prayer seeks the right path among so many that are wrong, yearns for the Spirit to fill, bless, comfort and guide us.

You may rightly be wondering if this devotional focus is mainly a calculated smoke screen to draw attention away from this morning's opaque and puzzling gospel text. But by way of waiting we will likely be better prepared to take the prayer and message of Jesus to heart.

Only a few moments before the start of his Passion, and in prayer to his heavenly Father, Jesus prays for his disciples and for us, and he says: *they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.* Here we see the fundamental dichotomy that marked the very first verses of this gospel and that has been echoed many times since. The divine and eternal Word abides with God in love, and always has, and always will. We who know, believe in and follow him also abide there – already, and completely.

And yet, Jesus prays, *I am not asking you to take them out of the world.* For now, we are left here. We are waiting. We are “*over the threshold but not through to the other side.*” Our waiting here, in this world, for now, as Jesus prays it, is not merely the passing of time but an incarnation in which we are also, each of us, to be the light of the world, the bread that comes down from heaven, and instances of I AM in the world. And so it is that you and I and the whole Church continuously pray: “*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*” This is, in part, our prayer of faithful waiting.

This Seventh Sunday of Easter is one of the most underrated and intriguing of all Sundays in the calendar of the Church. We are waiting with the first believers for the outpouring of the Spirit. But as well you and I are invited to wonder what or who we are now waiting for amidst the changes and chances of our own lives. Are we or are we not waiting for the right things as seen and known through the eyes of faith? How, by way of our fellowship and our prayers, do we know and live the waiting in faith of which Jesus spoke and prayed? *Amen.*

¹ From a lecture delivered in Atlanta, Georgia, in June 2004.