

Highland Presbyterian Church
Seventh Sunday in Easter – May 21, 2023
“Holy Waiting”
A sermon by Megan McCarty

Isaiah 40:21-31

Acts 1:1-11

Today is the day that we celebrate Ascension Sunday in the life of the larger church. It's why we have pulled out our beautiful, special ascension banner and are reading scripture and liturgy all about Jesus physically leaving our earth. It's an odd day in the life of Christianity, because if you are thinking, isn't that what we celebrated on Easter, the answer is yes. This is Easter 2.0. Or as the meme I saw yesterday online says, "this is the day Jesus started working from home." This is because our scriptures tell us that after Jesus was resurrected on Easter Sunday, he kept appearing to the disciples and was present with them again for forty days following Easter. This mirrors and kind of makes a forty-day sandwich with the days that Christ spent in the wilderness before beginning his ministry. These forty extra days that Jesus spent with his disciples were crucial to the disciples gaining the confidence to carry on their ministry after Jesus's actual ascension.

Now, this ascension story that we just heard is only found in the gospel of Luke-Acts. And I say it this way because based on the ways that both Acts and Luke are introduced, we are almost certain that they are written by the same author and as such can basically be seen as a continuation from one to the other. So, Luke's gospel ends with the Ascension, and the book of Acts starts with it, almost as if it's saying... picking up where we left off...

So, picking up where we left off after Easter, it's important to recognize that each gospel writer has a distinctive interpretation of the resurrection, and therefore, each also interprets its meaning for Jesus' followers in unique ways. So, the larger message that the writer of Luke and Acts wants us to hear and focus on is that through the power of the Holy Spirit, the church continues Jesus' ministry and amplifies it. The Holy Spirit is what is promised by Jesus to his followers over these extra forty days. And then, after the ascension comes the story of Pentecost, which we will celebrate next week – the Holy Spirit resting on each individual and showing us how to continue to be church without Jesus physically present.

Now, I really resonate with the disciples in this story – they want to know what's going on, they want to know what Jesus has planned, they want to know the timeline of when it's all going to go down, they want to know who is going to be invited and where it's all going to take place. Anyone else just really love a good plan? And Jesus has the audacity to tell these anxious disciples to relax... God's going to do what God's going to do on God's time. It's not for us to know. Just wait.

Now. In our current American culture, "waiting" is generally held as something to be avoided. We have fast food, next day deliveries, nonstop flights, Google searches that take milliseconds, on-demand movies, text messaging... Everything we surround ourselves with has

created a culture of impatience. Obviously, not all of these advances are bad, but Acts reminds us that sometimes we just need to wait, sit, and be.

In 1986 an international initiative called Slow Food was born out of a protest of placing a McDonalds at the Spanish Steps in Rome. The protest ultimately failed and if you go to Rome and visit the Spanish Steps, you will indeed be met with a McDonalds at the base of them. But, the Slow Food movement took off from there. It spread across Europe into Asia, Africa, Australia, South America, and eventually the US. The slow food movement is about just what it says – slowing down. The creators recognized that productivity was changing our way of being, threatening our environment and landscapes and the only way to really change is to go backwards, to return to our cultural roots – to use local ingredients when cooking, to connect with the earth again and grow food to rediscover regional and seasonal cooking. The organization helps educate students and fund school gardens, it helps provide small farms for indigenous populations, as well as funds small restaurants that use local ingredients, creating a cooks' alliance for chefs to learn from one another and provide support. Most recently they have started Slow Meat, which is specific to the US because the average US resident eats - individually – 270 pounds of meat per year and that meat is produced using unsustainable and unethical practices. Slow Food is trying to change our entire ethos and way of life. But boy do they have a challenge in front of them. Because we are not slow people anymore. We do not like to wait.

Jesus tells the disciples that they must wait and trust in God's promise. But the disciples, much like us sometimes, see no need to wait. They ask if "now" is the time to restore the kingdom to Israel. Luke's Gospel makes clear that what happens in Jesus will truly be the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. But perhaps "restore" indicates a hope that is too small. What God has in mind is not just bringing Israel back to the "good ole' days," but bringing Israel to its yet-unrealized goal of being light to the whole world. The disciples may have thought they were on the verge of inheriting an old-style kingdom, when in fact they are at the edge of God's mission to redeem all nations, a mission that will consume the rest of their lives (and ours).

While we wait, Acts reminds us not to assume we already know what we're waiting for. The disciples are essentially asking, "We already know what you're going to do. When will you do it?" The people of God have a long tradition, continuing today, of believing we can predict God's next steps. Acts is a story of surprises. Although we benefit from confidence in our faith, it helps to remember that God's ways are not our ways, and God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts.

We don't usually think about Ascension as a time of waiting; that sounds more like Advent. But waiting is always a holy time, a time to empty ourselves, and be filled with new possibilities. Scripture professor Robert W. Wall states well in his commentary "The Acts of the Apostles" what this time of waiting for God means: "Waiting for God to act is ... a community project. Waiting with others is an act of solidarity with friends. The apostles do not scatter and go their separate ways to await a private Spirit-filling or

personal experience of divine faithfulness. They ‘were joined together’ in a specific place to await God’s action on them all.”¹

I love the idea of waiting in community because the fact of the matter is that holy waiting, what we are doing right at this moment, is not passive. It’s actively working with the spirit to see where we are headed next AND being ok when we don’t have all the answers. Luke and Acts show how people take what Jesus did and taught to transform their lives into action – to go where God calls them and to act as the Holy Spirit empowers them. And, so, we take to heart the two men in white robes who say to Jesus’ followers, “People wherever you are, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? It’s time to move.”

These transitional moments of holy waiting can be exciting and scary. They can also initiate new beginnings in the aftermath of trauma. The disciples have just undergone a whirlwind of events, from the crucifixion of their leader to their experiences with him as resurrected Lord, and now they await a new phase of relating to him not in body but through the Holy Spirit.

Our seniors are also in a moment of holy waiting. It’s a wonderful time in their lives where they are about to transition to a brand-new way of life. It’s also a large transitional time for their parents as well, so be kind to them and call your mothers. These pivotal moments in our lives really cause us to slow down, to try and savor and celebrate big milestones, to recognize that a chapter is ending a new one is beginning – full of possibility and unknown. We will get a chance to celebrate them in just a moment, but my hope for both of you in this time is the same as it is for all of us in life: that we don’t assume that we know what God is up to in our lives, that we don’t try to plan everything out, that we embrace the activity of holy waiting, that we all slow down and return to our roots, that we remember that our work is right here in front of us while we wait and live into a constant state of transition. This holy act can bring us closer to God as we recognize that we don’t have all the answers but we can’t just stand around looking to the heavens. And – we know we are not alone. Luke-Acts makes it clear that the Holy Spirit is here to guide us. We just have to be ready to see what God is up to in these moments of holy waiting. Amen.

1. ¹ Robert W. Wall, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary* ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 45.