



First United Church of Oak Park

A Significant Pause

Acts 1:6-14

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40 days after Easter is the day of Ascension, which was this past Thursday, May 21, but we commemorate it today. Next Sunday will mark 50 days since Easter, and we will celebrate Pentecost. Karl Barth called this time, these 10 days between Ascension and Pentecost, a “significant pause.” A significant pause during which our task is to wait, to wait and pray, just as the disciples in our scripture did.

How fitting, how fitting that liturgically, right now, we are meant to be in a time of waiting, living in and taking a significant pause when that is all that life seems to be right now. We are waiting, we are in a pause that feels quite significant. The disciples in our story are waiting for the Spirit. They are waiting expectantly for the power of the Spirit to come as Jesus foretold. They wait in hope. What are we waiting for? How are we waiting?

It is believed that the author of the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are one and the same. And he appears to contradict himself as to when Christ’s ascension occurred. In Luke, Jesus ascends on the evening of Easter, the same day he conquered death, but in the first chapter of Acts it says that Jesus remained with the disciples and people for forty days before his ascension. This apparent discrepancy has been deemed an intentional, literary choice by our author, which would make an interesting basis for another sermon. But for our purposes, whether Jesus ascended on Easter or 40 days later, his followers had been through a rollercoaster of emotions: They watched their leader, teacher, friend suffer and die. They began to grieve and struggle with guilt. They rejoiced at the empty tomb, for Christ had risen, was alive, and claimed victory over death. They endured all of this only to lose him again — have him taken away, “watch him lifted into the clouds and out of sight.” They were left standing, gazing upward, in shock and awe, unsure of what to do next — speechless, confused,

anxious, grief-stricken all over again. Then they went to Jerusalem, gathered themselves together, and constantly devoted themselves to prayer.

Alone, gazing, shock and awe, unsure of what to do next, speechless, confused, anxious, grief-stricken ... these are just a few ways to describe the realities of the last couple of months. Therefore, I admire the disciples' calm response of sequestering and prayer. They patiently settle in to wait. How are we waiting?

Patiently is not the word I would use to describe my waiting. My anxiety and inability to focus well prevents me from sitting still or keeping my hands from fidgeting; my inner voice persistently asks, 'Are we there yet?' We live in a society of fast food, same-day dry cleaners, mobile ordering, online shopping with two-day free shipping ... delayed gratification isn't a thing. Waiting for any length of time is not our strong suit, and is deemed inefficient, especially if we don't know how long it will take.

And then I hear the words Jesus said, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that God has set." I am not in control. We are not in control. Yes, that is a frustrating fact, but can it not also be a freeing one?

Before coronavirus forced us into isolation and social distancing, when did you last take time to "smell the roses?" When did you take a significant pause in your life? What did you do? Why did you do it? How did you feel during and after it?

The disciples were better able to accept that they were not in control of how things would unfold than I would have been. "They wait as those who are still dependent on God's faithfulness, those who have no control over the timetable ..." They understood that no amount of action would bring about what God had promised them. Just like no amount of action will bring about what we are waiting for. In fact, it is far more our lack of action, staying home, sheltering-in-place, that holds more promise for getting us to what we wait for.

What are we waiting for? Perhaps you are waiting to hug your loved ones, to return to work, to find a job, to go off to college, to simply hang out with friends, and maybe we are waiting for the Spirit to do something we have yet to realize or can't even imagine.

We have been in this "significant pause" now for over 60 days. How have you spent this time? Have you done all you can to stay busy and be productive? Have you found time to wait and pray, whatever that may look like for you? Trust

me, there is no judgment here, as I have continually found projects and chores to stay busy. But I invite you to join me now to take a pause ...

Take a deep breath, close your eyes if you would like. Open your ears, your mind, your heart. What do you hear? Are there birds singing outside? A car driving by? Wind blowing through the trees? A dog barking? Is it quiet? What do you see in your mind's eye? Is there a color? A shape? A texture? An image? A memory? What do you feel? Feel the ground or the floor beneath your feet. Are you warm or cool? Is there any tension in your body? Are you worried or anxious? Or calm and peaceful? Take another deep breath and open your eyes.

In my reading about this passage from the book of Acts, one commentary talked about the significance of this passage in what it tells us about the eschatology of the author, basically that it had shifted from believing the end times were imminent. We are not talking about the end times in our context, but something they said really stuck with me. They said, "The world view as it had been, the methods and values for determining worth and significance in the world, had ended. There is a new reality which has turned the world upside down."

The old has passed away, behold the new *will* come.

We have been forced to take a pause. The world has been turned upside down. This time of isolation has not been easy, and it has affected everyone worldwide. Our worldviews are shifting; we are relating and reacting to the world differently.

The prophet Isaiah tells us that two primary activities of the church are to gather to wait and pray. We are the church, we are gathered, we are praying, and we are waiting. How will we wait? Let us wait in hope and with faith, because we are not in control, but we are not alone. What are we waiting for? The new that will come, maybe something the Spirit will do that is beyond our imagination. Thanks be to God.