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“Waiting Work”

Acts 1:13-26

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I cannot remember the student, but I talked to someone involved in a program where honor students in the US and honor students in Ukraine engaged in a semester-long, cross-cultural project that had something to do with world issues and leadership.

This is what I remember. The war was in its early stages. Russian had invaded and cities were being bombed with residences often being the target. But this did not keep the Ukrainian students from their project. One of their virtual get-togethers was held during a blackout. The Ukrainian students were gathered in a home in Kiev and were sitting in the dark with flashlights. You could hear explosions in the distance as they discussed their readings, shared their research and even laughed a little.

Those Ukrainian students were trying to stay out of harm’s way, but they still went about the business of life. Even under threat and with so much uncertainty about the future, there was schoolwork to do. It had to get done if they were going to complete the project. It might have even carried them.

Our passage has similar dynamics. It tells of a large gathering in a room. The disciples are among them. So too is Mary, the mother of Jesus, as well as other women followers of Jesus. They are the earliest church. They followed Jesus when he was alive, and they have been with Jesus after he rose from the grave. The risen Jesus told them to carry on the business of the movement. But Jesus is gone now and they don’t know what the future holds. But there is work to do, maybe because it needs to be done and maybe because it is what carries them. Listen:



¹³ When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying: Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴ All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the brothers and sisters (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, ¹⁶ “Brothers and sisters, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus, ¹⁷ for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.” ¹⁸ (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle, and all his bowels gushed out. ¹⁹ This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) ²⁰ “For it is written in the book of Psalms,

‘Let his house become desolate,
and let there be no one to live in it’;

and

‘Let another take his position of overseer.’

²¹ “So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” ²³ So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴ Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵ to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” ²⁶ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was added to the eleven apostles.

The future is far from certain and the world seems threatening.

Jesus wants this earliest church to make a witness beginning in Jerusalem..., *but who is going to listen?* The church already has been discredited in Jerusalem on multiple levels. To begin with, their witness is of a living Jesus that everyone in town knows was crucified. Lies were told by powerful people and as often happens when power puts itself to the task of persecution by propaganda, masses believed and a mob backed up the powers. It worked. He’s dead. Jesus is dead and who wants to upset the powers that killed him?

Also, who is going to listen to these *specific* disciples? I mean, look at what disciples do. One of them—Judas—showed what disciples are all about when his loyalty was bought.

That’s unfair, I know. But you know how people do. Name any group of people you can think of, and it takes just a few seconds to come up with the name of someone representing that group providing fodder to dismiss the lot of them.

- A football player is caught on camera hitting his girlfriend. **Jocks!**
- A politician proves to be a hypocrite or a crook. **Politicians!**
- A corporation sacrifices safety for profit. **Big Corporations!**



- An older person is close-minded, a young person is foolish. **Boomers!/Gen Zers!**
Someone is going to say, “**That’s how they all are.**”

It is a real blow to the credibility of any group when one of its leaders has been exposed for impropriety, whether it be financial like Judas, or another impropriety (I’ll let you fill in the blank). “**You heard what Judas did, didn’t you? I bet if you offered 30 pieces of silver to any one of them, they would sell him out. They are all hypocrites who just want your money.**”

That’s not fair, but it is the way the world thinks.

You know what is fair? To point out that while the people in that room may not have betrayed Jesus, they did abandon him. When Jesus was arrested, they fled. “**He’s a coward,**” can be as damning as “**She’s a crook.**”

Well, even that charge is not completely fair because there are women in that room who were with Jesus all the way to the cross. Still, *the disciples* fled. Chief among them was Peter who, in the courtyard outside where Jesus was being interrogated by the High Priest, denied knowing him three different times. It has to be *awkward* for Peter to stand up now and tell the other disciples what they are to do.

I’m not saying he has no business doing it. This is his business because Jesus asked him to lead the movement.

- It’s OK with Peter because he spent time with the risen Jesus and he knows he is forgiven.
- It’s OK with the rest of the disciples that Peter offers guidance because they share his story and faltered in the same way.
- Its certainly OK with me that Peter offers leadership because any minister with any measure of honesty and humility will admit to having failed in ways in which she or he has encouraged others to be faithful.

I am just saying that there is a *messaging problem* outside this room. Outside this room where Jesus followers are gathered- out there in the city of Jerusalem- people are going to think what they think. The internet is hard to scrub, gossip cannot be answered, and reputations are hard to restore. The earliest church is going to have to do its work despite what is being said about how they betrayed and abandoned the one who will be the subject of their preaching.

They have no other choice. Never mind that they are the ones who let Jesus down before he was crucified, they are the ones the risen Jesus chose to bear his witness. Read what Jesus said in Acts 1:8. He told them to make a witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth:

- **Jerusalem.** Jerusalem is a hard place to start because everyone knows everything I just told you, so who’s going to care what they have to say?
- **Judea.** Judea is Israel at large. It seemed wherever Jesus went in Judea there were always some powerful religious leaders confronting him. Won’t they oppose his followers too?
- **Samaria.** Samaria is where border people live. They are despised by both Jews and Gentiles. If the disciples associate with Samaritans, won’t they be despised too?



- **The ends of the earth.** That's where Gentiles live. Gentiles don't buy into the Jewish Law that Jesus fulfills so why should they care about a new Israel?

So, this between time for the early church is uncomfortable. Awkward for all of them. They need to do what Jesus calls them to do even though they have been discredited in the eyes of those to whom they will go.

American Congregations can relate. In today's America, some make fun of the church for

- being an institution that is interested only in its own survival,
- ignoring what science has to say,
- preaching outdated formula theology that makes God seem like a child-abuser,
- having pastors- having members- misbehave,
- aligning itself with some political figure as God's servant,
- using fear-based preaching to get people to join the church,
- using shame-based preaching to manipulate people to fall in line or join a cause.

Some of the criticism is unfair and some is not. Critics can be unfair when they dismiss the whole because of its parts, but they also can be God's servants in holding communities accountable to what needs to be addressed and changed.

The disciples in that room know they have messed up. They are going to have to figure out that their witness is not going to be about themselves as role models, but rather about the love of God who offers grace to others just as God gave them grace. The church needs time to find the confidence, hope and courage to take this movement again out into Jerusalem where they were discredited. As it turns out, they are not going to be ready until God's Spirit makes them ready, but it is going to take some time.

So what do they do in the meantime?

Well, there is work to do, work that maybe needs to be done and work that maybe carries them while they wait. To begin with, they need to pray. Prayer is sometimes dismissed as avoiding responsibility, such as when people who actually can do something about a problem say instead, "[Let's pray about it.](#)" But though prayer can be used to avoid the truth and dodge responsibility, it can also be a means by which to face the truth and deal with it.

- If you're a parent going through a divorce not yet knowing how to reconstruct your life...
- if you are someone waiting for a diagnosis that will not be heard until the doctor says it, and that's two weeks from Tuesday...
- or if you are disciples who are not ready to walk out that door and go into Jerusalem and beyond to the ends of the earth...

prayer is not nothing.

- Prayer is grounding oneself in God and remembering you are not alone;
- It is reminding oneself of God's love;
- It is asking to be forgiven and it is asking to forgive;



- It is seeking some guidance,
 - and asking for patience while waiting for the guidance;
- It is listening for some truth that so far hasn't been heard;
- It is asking for a path forward that so far cannot be seen....

Prayer is Waiting Work.

There is other waiting work to be done. I don't know if it is needed work, or work they need to do to carry through, but these disciples also have a vacancy to fill. Jesus had 12 disciples and now there are only 11. Sticking with eleven would forever be a reminder not only that they are one short, but *why* they are one short. One of them who Jesus called, a brother in the movement, betrayed Jesus for money and then took his own life. That's traumatizing. The group needs to heal. **“So, let's find someone to replace Judas so we can be whole again and move on.”**

Did they make the best choice? Well, they made the best choice they could. I mean, how do you replace a leader when you don't know where to be led- when you don't know what the future holds? One can understand why Peter gives the advice he does. He says, **“let's stick with who we know.”** He says, **“Let's choose someone who, like us, was with Jesus practically from the day he was baptized by John.”** That narrows the field. Two candidates jump immediately to mind: Justus and Matthias. **“Which one? We don't know what leadership skills are needed, so let's cast lots. Matthias, you're it!”**

They're doing the best they can. Sometimes, the church gets discredited for these kinds of *make-do decisions*; going with a safe choice rather than finding a Paul who may not have traveled with Jesus before his death but knows how to witness to the resurrected Christ in ways outsiders who also have never met Christ can understand.

But Paul comes later when there is greater clarity. This is a Waiting Time and the earliest Church does the best it can while waiting for greater clarity and direction. *Why should they be criticized for treading water when they don't know yet where to swim?*

- Why should someone who wants to do something different with her life, but doesn't know what it is, be made to feel bad because she keeps doing the job she would like to leave?
- Why should parents feel bad for doing their best as parents even when they doubt their parenting?
- Why should those whose faith is shaken, who have doubts, feel bad because they still want to go to church and bow their heads to the God they are questioning?
- Why should someone who doesn't know if her health will hold up feel bad for making plans as if she will be around for her grandchildren for many years yet?

Here's the thing: this Waiting Work carries the earliest church until it is ready to move. I do not know how long this waiting goes on, but the next chapter tells the story of Pentecost. It tells the story of this earliest church finding spiritual clarity and confidence in going about the business of what Jesus told them to do. It begins in the city of Jesus' crucifixion and of their failures, the city they thought would be most resistant to them. Both Jerusalem citizens and Jews in town for a



harvest festival are caught up in the Spirit of the movement and the journey of the Gospel begins to the ends of the earth.

It is quite a dramatic tale, and I am not so naïve as to suggest that there is a formula for waiting that will lead to an assured good end. What I am saying, though, is that much of life is liminal time. By that, I mean that much of life can be spent in the between times of uncertainty. In those between times there is at least waiting work we can do... sometimes because it needs to be done, and sometimes because it carries us. And sometimes, *God is working in the waiting too*. We may not see it, but sometimes a better future begins even when we think we are waiting.

I've talked about church a lot in this sermon, and I'll stick with form and talk about church one more time- this church. I think in real and powerful ways, our congregation waited well when the future was quite unknown.

Back in 2019, this congregation, like many others, played with the idea of rolling out a Clear-Vision 20/20 Long Range Plan in the year 2020. But you know what happened. The Pandemic hit and this church had to first react and then adapt in response to a threat. We lived through it and you know what happened so I won't give a history lesson here. But indulge me as I throw out some images:

- In-person gatherings immediately canceled,
- Two Sundays of worship broadcast using Jen Brother's I-Phone as a camera,
- Isolation made worse by a polarizing election,
- George Floyd's killing,
- Bible Schools online,
- Elders ordained not by placing hands on heads but by raising them to screens.

But there was waiting work to be done. We made safe choices at first.

- Distancing,
- masking,
- washing hands while reciting the Apostles Creed or singing Amazing Grace,
- filming choir members scattered throughout this sanctuary so we can have anthems.

Like other churches, we did Waiting Work and because of your session and other leaders and teachers, we did it well.

Sadly, some churches and some individuals did not do the Waiting Work well. Youth suicide rates increased. Some marriages couldn't take the strain. Some congregations closed. And, for many people and churches, isolating led to siloing. What seemed safe at the time was sticking with their own kind and staying that way.

But I think this church did the waiting work well. I don't say this much, but I truly believe God's Spirit was with us when we not only carried on worship, filled vacancies in leadership, and carried on what we used to do only more online than in person. We felt the threat but we faced it. We asked, "[what are the immediate needs? Who is the most vulnerable, who needs help?](#)" We



found ways to check in on each other, and we went to agencies and ministries in the community and asked them what they were seeing and how we could help. We conducted the Mission Build campaign which one could say was future-oriented, except that it had been planned before the pandemic and we were just doing what we had already decided to do. Though we couldn't get together to talk about it, we found a way to talk about George Floyd and racism together. All while we were waiting for the pandemic to be over.

We did the work of worship, fellowship, education and outreach because it needed to be done if we were going to continue as a church that does such things. We did the work because it carried us through the pandemic.

What we didn't quite understand at the time was that God was doing Waiting Work among us. We changed. We became stronger in some ways. We emerged as more mission-minded and generous. We were protective of the budget because we feared a recession, but giving went up. Even though this year's budget is not yet passed, I can assure you that it will contain a sizable jump in its outreach giving.

Millie asked me, "[Does the church know how lucky we are that we got through the pandemic as well as we did?](#)" Part of the reason for this sermon is to let you know how grateful we should be. Not all American congregations fared as well. Just to paint with the broadest of strokes, some tried simply to survive and wait till it was over and now they are weaker and without direction. Some didn't survive. Then there were those churches that embraced the isolation and polarization as an opportunity for growth and attention. To hear the preaching of their pulpits, you would think that many have become little more than chapels, community organizations and propagandists for progressive or conservative political and social movements. Many are self-righteous and I'd even say mean.

I thank God that somehow while doing the waiting work together, we have become even more committed to treasuring our diversity as a church where people who disagree not only share pews but share the work of the church at Alexa House or building a house for Habitat. Our energy isn't wasted on proving what isn't the truth to begin with, that there is some pristine righteous cause or some righteous movement out there that is going to solve the world's problems and fix what is broken. Instead, we have stuck to seeking the needs beneath the issues and doing the best we can to do something about them. We have shied away from being a billboard church with clever messages, but rather a working church seeking results.

So maybe this congregation can be an imperfect and flawed role model when you find yourself in between times- times that seem threatening and uncertain. everyone- you included- wants answers, solutions, and direction *right now*. There are unhealthy ways to live during those times, beginning with denial and waiting till it is over. But there are healthy ways.

- You can pray- not the avoidance prayers but the confessing-listening-asking prayers that keep you open to the Spirit.
- You can study and learn.
- You can be attentive to your friends, family and community.
- And you can find ways to help others while you wait for the help you need



I commend to you *Waiting Work*—being faithful in the work that needs to be done and the work that can carry you through—and be open to the work that God is doing in you while you are doing your *Waiting Work*..

