This August 25th, Linda and I will be married 47 years. Can’t imagine how I could possibly be married longer than I am years old – I see my age as 39! 47 years is a long time, but as I try to remember our college years before we were married, when we were separated for the summer months...now that does seem like 47 years ago. The summer before we graduated, Linda was in York, PA and I was in Souderton. The year after we graduated Linda was in Altoona and I was in State College.

What spurred these memories was a conversation I had recently with a college student who hadn’t been able to complete her first year in college due to the Coronavirus pandemic. She remarked how strange it was not to be able to hang out with her friends at a moment’s notice and how long the separation may be. I tried to empathize, saying I remember that separation strangeness during college and how hard it was – being separated and transitioning for the summer months, leaving behind college friends and a certain delightful woman. However, there was a major difference, in that Linda and I had a known end to our separation while the student did not.

Transitioning between academic years or at college graduation or for pandemics can be (actually is) tough. However, transitions don’t end with college or pandemics. Friends and coworkers can leave, we change jobs, or move out of neighborhoods, states, or even countries. Transition goodbyes can be hard at any time, but especially when you’ve spent years with people and are not sure when or how you will see them again.

In both our gospel passage and in our Acts of the Apostles passage, Jesus and the disciples are parting. It’s a big goodbye. It’s been forty days since Jesus was resurrected, when he came back to life and appeared, first to the women at the tomb, then to the disciples huddled in a room, and to the two on the road to Emmaus. And more.

You probably noticed that the ascension story is found in two different books of the Bible, Luke 24 and Acts 1. Each version is different but also similar. In Luke’s gospel, it seems to
be almost the same day as the resurrection, but doesn’t say so explicitly. In Acts, also authored by Luke, he explicitly writes that it’s been 40 days. Scholars debate how to explain this, but the consensus is that Luke wanted it to be a theologically complete gospel account.

In the ancient world, the historical timeline of certain writings was less important than the events and the meaning attached to them. The Peoples New Testament Commentary by Boring and Craddock says that “Theology, not chronology, is [Luke’s] point, and... he is perfectly aware of [what he’s including]”. We can look at both accounts as complementing each other and serving different purposes - one to close out the gospel and another to set the stage for the coming of the Spirit and the Spirit’s work through the group of Jesus followers. I’m going to focus on the Acts passage, but consider the gospel version here and there, since they complement each other.

As I was reading through the Acts passage, I realized that we are now at 43 days from Easter, since Ascension was on this past Thursday. Easter feels like a while ago. 40 days is a long time – especially this year’s 40+ days. It struck me to think that, after the resurrection, Jesus kept appearing during those 40 days, being with the disciples, teaching them, eating with them, even cooking them fish (John 21:1-14), and walking with them. 40 extra days with Jesus! I imagine that the disciples were comforted by Jesus being with them but they probably tried to avoid thinking about when Jesus would leave again.

In Acts, Luke says that Jesus “showed himself to these men and gave them convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God” (v. 3). “On one occasion, while he was eating with them...” (v. 4). It literally reads as “sharing the salt” with the disciples, Which implies a relational intimacy.
One day, while Jesus is eating with them, he gives the disciples what would be one of his final instructions. Jesus says, “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (v. 4b-5).

Even though the disciples had been with Jesus for 40 days and several years before that, they still weren’t always tracking with Jesus. The disciples come closer to Jesus and crowd around him, asking, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (v.6). Jesus doesn’t exactly say no, but basically he responds, saying, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And at that, Jesus goes up” (v.7-8).

Jesus reorients the disciples away from speculation about the culmination of history, reminding them that it isn’t about empires rising or falling but about continuing his work, witnessing to his work. Jesus tells them they won’t be alone, tells them to wait…and leaves mysteriously. The disciples are left gaping, jaws hanging open. The book of Acts says, “he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight” (v. 9).

I’m not about to try to explain the weird trans-dimensional process that occurs here or the physics of it. I trust that Jesus actually ascended and went to the Father, though that place isn’t a literal “behind the clouds” in our earthly sky. Luke wasn’t trying to be scientifically accurate, but using words to indicate Jesus’ ascension and connecting it to the presence of God’s dwelling place. In the Hebrew scriptures, clouds often symbolize the presence and power of God (Exodus 13:21; 19:16; 40:34; Ps. 68:4; Ezek. 1:4; Dan. 7:13).
The ascension also echoes how the prophet Elijah was taken up in a chariot of fire at the end of his ministry. But here, Jesus, not just a prophet but God incarnate, returns to where he came from, to the dwelling place of God. Paul writes in Philippians that Jesus was exalted (Phil 2:6-11). The ascension is part of the vindication, confirmation, or stamp of God’s approval of Jesus as Messiah. Psalm 47 said, “God has ascended amid shouts of joy” (v.8).

Well, at first, the disciples aren’t shouting but staring. The disciples stand agape and reasonably so. They’ve just seen something miraculous, marvelous, and other worldly. I’d stare too. Beyond the natural shock at one’s teacher and Messiah finally saying goodbye and leaving, the exit itself is pretty jaw dropping. The gaping jaws of the disciples come shut when two messengers in bright white clothing snap them out of it. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven (v.11).

Somehow, the combination of Jesus’ words, Jesus’ ascension, and shiny bright messengers (clearly from God - pay attention to those folks in shiny bright clothing), this combination helps the disciples finally put it all together. The disciples then worship Jesus and return to Jerusalem, rejoicing. They were outside of the main city, on the Mount of Olives, near Bethany, and they quickly head back to the main part of the city to wait for the Spirit to come. Men and women disciples are there. They head up to a room where they had been meeting and the group gathers to pray.

The NRSV translates it this way: “all these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer” (v.14). The Message says, “They agreed they were in this for good, completely together in prayer.” Luke’s gospel version has the disciples heading to the temple
continually, praising God. It is poignant that the last time, some of the disciples went back to fishing. This time, they are all in.

The disciples get on task right away - and start waiting. This is not a passive waiting, by any means, but a fervent waiting. They are busy waiting - praying, praising, meeting together. United Methodist theologian, William Willimon notes that in this passage, “Gathering to wait and to pray are depicted as two primary activities of a faithful church”. This fervent waiting is joyful, trusting, prayerful.

The disciples were probably asking, “What’s next?” Jesus said the Holy Spirit would come, but what exactly would that look like? How would things pan out for this ragtag group of Galilean Jews following a crucified, raised, and ascended Messiah? They certainly couldn’t guess what laid ahead in the next few chapters of Acts, but in their fervent waiting, they trusted that whatever laid ahead, the power and resources would be provided by God.

Waiting is not an easy thing. We typically feel the need to somehow distract ourselves from waiting. One could say waiting requires that we occupy ourselves with something productive, utilize the time. It depends both on how you look at waiting, as space to breathe, as an opportunity to do or as “time to kill.” Distracting ourselves prevents us from thinking about the unknowns or the what-ifs. Waiting can also lead to creativity. Boredom can lead you down a rabbit hole of thoughts, or lead to a sketch of something beautiful, into a poem, or provide an idea. Letting your mind wander or “wakeful resting,” provides mental downtime that improves your memory and creativity (I remember my mother when caught napping would say, “I’m not sleeping, just resting my eyes!). Waiting has been scientifically proven to do good.

Waiting was crucial and positive for the early church. The early disciples embarked on fervent waiting and it ended up changing their community and providing them with
power they couldn’t have imagined - the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit working in
and through them, all over the world.

In Acts, the disciples are unable to embark on a world-changing mission without the
prayerful waiting, singing, and meeting, without the presence of the Holy Spirit coming
like a roaring wind and with tongues of fire. Fervent waiting is key to seeing what God has
in store for the ragtag group of Jesus-followers.

What I hear from this passage today is that we, sisters and brothers, are also called to
wait and pray. We cannot do and be the church on our own. We are wrestling with how
to move forward in many ways: how do we reach out to our community? How can we
hear what God is doing and wants to do in us and through us? Through the fervent
waiting. Praying. Praising. Together – as we are able.

Sisters and brothers, next Sunday is Pentecost - the day when we mark the Spirit’s
coming, when the Spirit fills and empowers. Can you wait with me, in prayer, asking the
Holy Spirit to come and fill us abundantly, to guide us and give us vision for God’s work in
our community? Can you commit this week to 10 minutes a day of prayer - for our church
and how we can “seek justice, wholeness, and community through the gospel of Jesus
during this time of pandemic waiting?”

Let’s start now - by praying together with the prayer song, “Holy Spirit, come with power”
(light blue hymnal # 26).

“Holy Spirit, come with power, breathe into our aching night. We expect you this glad
hour, waiting for your strength and light. We are fearful, we are ailing, we are weak and
selfish too. Break upon your congregation, give us vigor, life anew.
Holy Spirit, come with fire, burn us with your presence new. Let us as one mighty choir sing our hymn of praise to you. Burn away our wasted sadness and enflame us with your love. Burst upon your congregation, give us gladness from above.

Holy Spirit, bring your message, burn and breathe each word anew deep into our tired living till we strive your work to do. Teach us love and trusting kindness, lend our hands to those who hurt. Breathe upon your congregation and inspire us with your word”.
Amen.

Clay A. Moyer

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