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 Scripture: Acts 1:1-11
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 Ascension Sunday

I want you to think back long ago to those days when you may have taken a plane ride... And I wonder if one of those times you were on a plane, if you had the experience of the captain coming on telling you that they were beginning their descent, and then later saying that you were going to be in a holding pattern while a weather system moved over, or while the airport landed other planes, so instead you were going to be circling and waiting in the air for a bit.

That has happened to me and I can tell you that I find it SO frustrating. When you are almost home or excited to just be at your destination and then you have to wait longer.

I'm not a very good wait-er. I like to keep busy while I wait. The Chick Fil A drive through at times tests my patience. The MVA drives me absolutely bonkers. Waiting is not my superpower.

And I think that's a common enough experience. One of the best most beloved gifts given to graduates is a copy of Dr. Seuss' book, "Oh the Places You'll Go!" I received a cherished copy from a beloved teacher when I was a senior in high school and it's one of my favorites. In it you can see our culture's attitude toward waiting on full display. Indulge me for a minute as I share with you some of the lines.

"Oh! The places you'll go! You'll be on your way up! You'll be seeing great sights! You'll join the high fliers who soar to high heights. You won't lag behind, because you'll have the speed. You'll pass the whole gang and you'll soon take the lead. Wherever you fly, you'll be best of the best. Wherever you go, you will top all the rest." But then Dr. Seuss offers a fair dose of reality when he adds, *"Except when you don't. Because sometimes, you won't."* And he goes on to describe that bang-ups and hang-ups can happen to you. You can be left in a lurch. And you can enter a slump. And then Dr. Seuss shares how sometimes **you can get stuck in a most useless place, 'The waiting place... for people just waiting.**

And for several sentences he goes on about the different kinds of waiting that happen there. Calling the waiting place a most useless place just about sums up how we think of the value of waiting.

This resonates with me because we are doing an incredible amount of waiting right now. And no, I don't mean just the line to get in to Costco and Trader Joe's. I mean, we are in a season of waiting. Waiting for a vaccine or medicine to be developed to help fight the Coronavirus. Waiting for the stay at home orders to lift in our county. Waiting for society to reopen and figure out our new normal. Waiting to see how the locals who have already reopened fare. Waiting to see if numbers spike or continue to decline. Waiting to see how businesses fare to see if more jobs will be cut. Waiting to see what will happen with childcare in the summer and schools in the fall. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting. All the time, wanting things to be different.

But take heart. We are not alone in the experience of waiting. Today's scripture is about the disciples in their time of waiting after the resurrection of Jesus before the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The writer of the book of Acts shares with us that after Jesus' resurrection Jesus appeared to the disciples alive over 40 days. (We've taken a look at most of these resurrection appearances recorded in the gospels in our worship services from Easter until now). During this time, Jesus ordered the disciples not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father to be fulfilled, telling them that they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit very soon.

As is typical during times of waiting, the disciples had questions. Probably many questions. Probably unanswerable questions. But scripture records only this one: "Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" they ask. Jesus basically tells them it isn't any of their business. "It is not for you to know." Apparently, that info is only given out on a need to know basis and even though Jesus is leaving them they are not in the need to know category. Instead, Jesus reiterates that the Holy Spirit will come to them.. And they will be Jesus witnesses to the world. At that moment, Jesus is taken up, in a cloud to the heavens. The cloud being a common symbol for the divine presence in scripture. And the circle of incarnation is complete - Jesus comes from God to us as a baby in the flesh, Emmanuel, God-with-us, and is now returning to be with God.

And so the disciples must wait some more. If anyone has ever spent time waiting with toddlers and preschoolers you know the impatience, the frustration of waiting quite well. And you know all the questions that come up in the midst of waiting. We adults are not that much better at waiting, but most of us are able to mask it a little more with a little more patience. Ultimately waiting seems so unfair. So unproductive. Such a waste of time.

If I were one of the disciples, as incredible as it would have been to witness Jesus ascending in all his glory.. I would be wondering why we still had to keep waiting. Why have to wait even longer? Hadn't the disciples waited enough? Couldn't Jesus have ascended and the Holy Spirit descended upon them in the same moment?

Maybe here's where we need to shift our theology, our understanding, of waiting just a bit. Maybe we can reframe the waiting, so that it's not only negative.

Because, what I glean from this scripture is that our waiting does not mean God is not active, or acting. Our waiting does not mean that our time is wasted or unoccupied. Our waiting does not mean God is not present with us.

The time between planting a seed and the seed sprouting does not mean nothing is happening. The time after an egg is fertilized and a baby is born does not mean that nothing is happening. The time from when a caterpillar creates a chrysalis and then emerges as a butterfly does not mean that nothing is happening.

Waiting, as hard as it is, does not always have to be bad.

Our waiting creates room, creates space. To listen. To trust. To discern. To pray. To practice being still. To bless. To grow in darkness without the pressure of performing, or being observed. Or even just to stay empty or open to what may come.

In John's gospel, Jesus tells the disciples, "Unless I go, the Spirit cannot come." Jesus even goes so far as to say it is to their advantage that he goes away so that he can then send the Spirit to them.

For the disciples this period of waiting is different than before. The resurrection has happened, Jesus has appeared to them, but no longer will Jesus keep appearing. This period of waiting brings with it the promise of something coming that is special, beautiful, and powerful - something that would link them to Jesus for all time - The Holy Spirit. Psychology studies have shown us repeatedly that the more valuable something is to us, the more important it is, or the greater the service it will render, the longer we are willing to wait for it. Perhaps with the promise of this special gift, the disciples' waiting was not as hard as it could have been.

In fact, what happens in the waiting? Well Luke tells us in his gospel, which offers a slightly different version than the account in Acts, that after the ascension the disciples return to Jerusalem with **great joy**, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Again I want to share what I shared before. Mostly, so I can hear it. Waiting, as hard as it is, does not always have to be bad. Waiting does not mean that God is not active, or acting. Waiting does not mean that our time is wasted or unoccupied. Our waiting does not mean that God is not present with us.

Father Richard Rohr uses the Ascension scriptures to talk about the connection between absence and presence. We know this connection. We are feeling it deeply right now. It's a classic, "absence makes the heart grow fonder" scenario. Only when we are absent from someone or something, do we long for them, miss them, and realize how much we love them. In their absence, longing emerges, and we desire their presence.

When we think about that principle in relationship to this scripture and to Jesus' ascension into heaven - Jesus' absence creates longing and the space for God's presence to come. When Jesus physically leaves the world, he leaves the disciples without the divine presence in the way they were used to. And so, in this midst of this absence, a longing a need, a desire emerges.. Into the vacuum, the emptiness that Jesus' presence left in the disciples, God comes with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. If Jesus had stayed with them always, what room would there have been, what desire, for the Holy Spirit? Would there have been an invitation or space in the disciples' hearts for the Spirit to come and fill?

Our waiting, our times of absence, will not be wasted. Our waiting, our times of absence, have the potential to create room and space for God to enter, for our loved ones to be invited in more deeply, for the Holy Spirit to fill us in never before experienced ways.

You know waiting has a way of draining everything that we are full of, and yet at the same time, it is in our emptiness that God can fill us with what truly matters.

We are in a holding pattern of collective waiting right now. And yet, God can fill us with new dreams and visions for ourselves, for our families, for the church, for our communities. This is a time when we are rediscovering and reimagining what is truly essential, what is truly important, and how we can make room for those things.

After Jesus' ascension, the disciples return with great joy to Jerusalem.. And while they wait, they are still doing what they can in the temple in the meantime. With that joy they are blessing others, continuing their worship and other spiritual practices. They are making themselves available in every way to be and hang out in God's temple, to be with the people.

I don't know if you can wait with joy right now. I don't know if you can wait with hope. But here are some thoughts that might help you in your time of waiting: 1- This time of waiting won't last forever. There will be an end to our waiting. 2 - We don't have to wait alone. We are all waiting together. 3 - Perhaps we can come out of this in a way that is somehow worth the wait. Perhaps the gift of waiting in this time, perhaps any self-emptying we are doing, is creating space for God to work more fully in us. Perhaps, again, as happened in the early church, this time of waiting will lead to renewal and new life. To being filled in new ways with God's spirit and joy.

May we bear our waiting with humility and patience, even joy. May our waiting empty us of unnecessary things. And may the space created in our waiting be filled with the fruit of God's Spirit.

Stay

A Blessing for Ascension Day

I know how your mind
rushes ahead
trying to fathom
what could follow this.
What will you do,
where will you go,
how will you live?

You will want
to outrun the grief.
You will want
to keep turning toward
the horizon,
watching for what was lost
to come back,
to return to you
and never leave again.

For now
hear me when I say
all you need to do
is to still yourself
is to turn toward one another
is to stay.

Wait
and see what comes
to fill
the gaping hole
in your chest.

Wait with your hands open
to receive what could never come
except to what is empty
and hollow.

You cannot know it now,
cannot even imagine
what lies ahead,
but I tell you
the day is coming
when breath will
fill your lungs
as it never has before
and with your own ears
you will hear words
coming to you new
and startling.
You will dream dreams
and you will see the world
ablaze with blessing.
Wait for it.
Still yourself.
Stay.
—Jan Richardson