

Time Between Times

Ephesians 1:15-23

Acts 1:1-11

Please pray with me:

God of all the ages, and God of all our moments, help us to be present to you this morning. As we stand gaping up into heaven, may we find your direction for our lives, for our church, for our future. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my Rock and my Redeemer.

I think almost everyone encounters at least one time in your life when you stand somewhere in between the already and the not yet. All that is known and familiar no longer exists. All that will be is unknown, vague and undefined. These are times of expectant waiting—any length of time between an instant and an eon—when you feel suspended in mid-air, caught up in uncertainty and anticipation.

Any number of events can bring about this sense of suspended animation, and it can last as short as that intake of breath when you know you've hurt yourself but you're not quite sure how seriously, or as long as the time between losing an old job and finding a new one; the length of summer between graduating from high school and beginning college; the lifetime of courage between experiencing the loss of a loved one and rediscovering your identity as a survivor. This is the time between the biopsy and the results, the conception and the birth, the broken leg and the removal of the cast. This is the time between times.

After Easter Sunday, Jesus spent 40 days with the disciples. On the 40th day, he took off. Vamoosed. He ascended to his heavenly Father. He left the disciples in between times. Listen for the account as it is told in the Acts of the Apostles 1:1-11 ~

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me: for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Can you imagine that? All the disciples standing around, staring into the empty sky... Did you see that? What just happened? And what do we do now? These friends and followers of Jesus had already lived through Good Friday, and had thought that the dire end to their dreams. At the Easter event, they rejoiced that maybe indeed all their hopes and longings would be fulfilled. They had spent 40 days—the biblical time of preparation—with Jesus, and now? Now, in a gust of wind, they were blown back into that time between the times—full of confusion, and bewilderment and disorientation. They were plunged into the time between times.

For many theologians, this story is about the glorification and exaltation of Jesus—all that we've been singing about this morning—as he ascends to the heavens to be vindicated over all his political and spiritual enemies. But I found my focus settling on these bereft disciples, squinting up into the sunlight, wondering where their leader went and who was going to tell them what to do now.

This is the picture of the church in the time between times: interim time.

Now, interim is the term used to describe the state of a church who finds itself between pastors, and because we at Orchard Lake are in the midst of the search process for our next head of staff, I was particularly interested in what this passage had to tell me about the dynamics of the body of believers. But I soon realized that interim time describes all of us. Interim time is this present economic uncertainty. Interim time is the time between jobs. Interim time is the time for any of us who feel unsettled, anxious or bewildered, hanging suspended between the disintegration of the world as you knew it, and the emergence of something new. We are all in interim time.

No matter how you define it, or experience it, interim time is desperately uncomfortable. We all long to have Jesus back among us, instructing us how to live, leading the way, performing miracles among us, raising the dead. But the truth is that the departure of Jesus was absolutely necessary, in order for the disciples to realize that they were called—to become, not just disciples following Jesus and watching him minister to others—but disciples who recognized that they were empowered to continue on and carry out his mission and ministry, in Jerusalem, in the neighboring areas, and to the ends of the earth. Jesus had to depart in order for them to experience what Paul wrote to the Ephesians: to discover the living hope to which they were called, the incredible riches of his inheritance among the saints, and the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe (Ephesians 1:15-23). That's the potential discovery for those who are willing to engage interim time.

The disciples want to stay rooted to the spot, staring in numb disbelief into the vacant space left by Jesus. But the angels come along to say: What are you doing? Don't just stand there, gazing into heaven! Jesus is no longer here to preach good news, heal the sick and feed the hungry. It's now up to you. That mission now is owned by you. Get your head out of the clouds and get on with it.

I know that some of you are uneasy about the pastoral change that we anticipate here at Orchard Lake. Churches are always unsettled by pastoral changes. It seems so much hinges on what the pastor says and does. But actually, the church is not the pastor. It's the people.

I was reading recently about the new members class held at another church. Just a few folks attended the class, and it soon became clear to the pastor that it was somewhat taking the form of an interview, and he was not the interviewer. The potential new members had all sorts of questions about the programs and the services provided by the church, and eventually asked the central question directly: What is the church going to do for us? The pastor sat quietly for a moment, and replied with his own question: What are you going to do for the church?..... I understand they left and never came back! But you see, the pastor knew—as all pastors know—that the church is not the pastor. And I've certainly told you many times, it's not the building either. What is it? It's the people. Church happens when people realize that they have no power in themselves, but they come together to believe and receive and offer to others the power that comes from God.

This truth is illustrated in a very real and dramatic way by St. James-by-the-sea Episcopal Church in San Diego, which was established in the early 1900s down on the main boulevard by the beach, and by the 1950s had grown to be an imposingly large and vibrant congregation housed in a magnificent building at the top of Prospect Street. Over the course of years, the membership had dwindled and ministries moved into the outlying areas, leaving this congregation at its lowest point with a mere 65 members. The last pastor had just accepted a call to a larger, more vibrant congregation, when a law was passed in San Diego that mandated all buildings had to be brought up to code for earthquakes, no matter what their age. This struggling congregation was hit with a bill for \$3 million to make that happen.

At this point, it seemed clear to the denomination that the church was done for—it certainly couldn't afford the building and it was hard done by to scrape together the amount needed to pay a pastor. The diocese asked the small session to vote to dissolve itself. But after some time of prayer, this small group of people realized that they still were called as disciples to carry on the mission in that place. They were inspired to the truth that the church is not about the pastor, it's about the people. And so they continued to meet weekly, and began to study the scriptures together. They studied the lectionary texts each week so that they could preach the sermons to themselves. They began to pray together about their financial difficulties so that they could find a way to raise the funds they needed to keep the building. They realized there was still a vital and necessary need for the good news in the community around them, so they began to go into the streets to share it.

And lo and behold, that little pastor-less church began to grow. Those they ministered to on the streets began to come to worship, and brought with them more need for more ministry, and more people to do it. Each week, there were more folks in the sanctuary, ministering to one another—sharing the good news of the gospel, praying for one another, offering each other the love and support and community, and calling upon one another to do the work of Christ. You can see it coming, can't you? That struggling congregation is today a vibrant, thriving church of almost 700 people. They do have a pastoral staff now, but it was in the interim time—the in-between state of the already done and the not yet come—that this church discovered what discipleship really means.

When Jesus departed into heaven, leaving his disciples without their shepherd, he did not leave them alone. He gave them the promise that they too would be empowered, filled with the Holy Spirit a mere ten days later—the Spirit that would change them from a fearful, waiting group into confident, effective witnesses for the transformative power of God. The story is that this anxious and bewildered community had no power of its own. It possessed none and it could generate none for itself. It had no claim and no cause for self-congratulation. And yet, the power that is given by God caused this fragile little community to have energy, courage, imagination and resources completely disproportionate to its size. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. Pentecost comes next week. The time when we remember that the Spirit, poured out upon all peoples, is at work in the world, at loose in our lives, and at work in this place.

As a church, as individuals, as a people caught up in the middle of an uncertain economic time, we all may feel in one way or another that we are those disciples—caught by surprise at our change of status, feeling bereft by the departure of all we knew and loved and counted on. But may the very same words that Paul gave to the Ephesians encourage you today: I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of Glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe (Eph. 1:17-19a).