

“Between Memory and Promise”

Acts 1:6-14

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As we join the story, the disciples are with the resurrected Jesus at Mount Olivet, just outside Jerusalem. They have been riding an emotional roller coaster. They have gone from the daily ups and downs of following Jesus to the agonizing grief of watching him die to the indescribable joy of discovering that he is alive again. Now that matters finally seem to be headed in the right direction, they ask, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Surely they mean well, but just as surely Jesus must wonder whether every disciple he has called is named Gilligan! He has spent the better part of three years telling these guys that his mission is about matters of the heart, a kingdom within. He has demonstrated over and over again that he is not interested in political power because his kingdom is not of this world. Yet the first thing his disciples ask him when they have a moment alone after his resurrection is, “So, is it now that you will restore the kingdom?” Where does Jesus find these guys?

Yet, ever patient, Jesus answers the disciples’ question. It is not for you to know the timetable for the ultimate consummation of all things, he says, which isn’t what you think it is anyway. You will receive the Holy Spirit and then it is your responsibility to be witnesses of all that you have experienced. Then, Jesus ascends into the heavens and, rather than attending to the work Jesus has just given them, the disciples gaze upward until two men in white robes nudge them ever so gently back to their task, assuring them that he will one day return.

At first glance, the disciples seem like the biggest bunch of incompetents ever assembled, and not just in this scene but throughout their journey with Jesus. Yet, even if they are, their incompetence is a source of encouragement for us. For there are many basic things we just can’t seem to get either, like how to love each other rather than squabbling all the time, how to focus on matters of the Spirit rather than

getting caught up in organizational minutiae, how to live faithfully in the present moment rather than worrying about when it is all going to end. Yet, the truth is, these disciples deserve a break. They have been on an emotional roller coaster. Perhaps more importantly, they are experiencing the tensions that come with living in between times.

They are living in between the time of knowing the historical Jesus and experiencing the completion of his reign, in between the joy of resurrection and the final consummation, in between the memory of what was and the promise of what will be. In such a time, there is tension, there is anxiety, there is ample reason for confusion of purpose and groping for meaning. There is always the unknown in life, there is ever the reality of not being able to control everything, but right now the disciples aren't even sure of the lay of the land. How are they to live in such a time? And what resources will aid them?

These are important questions for us because we live in between times, in between a past we can make sense of and a future that is unknown, in between memory and promise. As individuals, we have varying pasts - some joyful, some painful - but at least they are known. The future is not. As a church, we have many wonderful memories, though we do well to look closely at the details of the color glossy images in our minds and see the heart-wrenching struggles that have shaped us. But will our future be worthy of our past? Even in our nation, we live in between times. So much is changing, but changing to what? Living between memory and promise involves much tension and anxiety. How do we live in such a time and what helps us to do so?

One thing the first disciples have is each other. They may be anxious, they may ask dumb questions, and they may struggle mightily to do what Jesus commands them, but in all of this they are not alone, they have each other. They have had each other to laugh with and cry with all along the way. Now they have each other to be anxious with and talk things through with. Immediately following Jesus' ascension, when the men in white robes urge them to go back to living, what do they do? They return to Jerusalem and gather in an upper room *with one another* to support each other and pray together.

Men and women, including Mary, the mother of Jesus, gather. One wonders what Mary must feel after all she has been through. This in-between time must be the most anxious of all for her. So, what does she do but surround herself with people who care about her and share her experience, people who will laugh and cry and pray with her. This is not the only resource we have in the in-between times of life, but one critical resource we have is each other.

As individuals, we journey through many trying transitions - in work and family, in education and our development as human beings. It is a wonder any of us makes it through adolescence! And that our parents make it through as we are aging, well, that is evidence enough for me that there must be a God! But, when we enter these troubled waters of change that come at different times, sometimes when we expect them, sometimes not, it is critical that we have people to wrap their arms around us. I will never forget the support I received when my mother died suddenly at forty-eight, the people who stood by me. Not every moment was warm and fuzzy, but the presence of others sustained me. We never know how much we mean to one another!

As a church, we also journey through times of transition and my sense is that this is such a time, partly because all churches in our culture are living through a major paradigm shift and partly because our city is growing rapidly. This is an exciting time with wonderful opportunities, but also an anxious time with an uncertain future. Church families need to stay together in times like this, for the reason Jesus names in the high priestly prayer of John 17, to maintain the unity God desires, and for practical reasons as well. We need each other always, but especially in unsettled times. The good news is we are there for each other.

In the time between memory and promise, the first disciples have each other, but this is not all they have; they also have the gift of the Spirit. To address the anxiety he knows exists, Jesus says the Spirit will come upon his followers to empower them. Elsewhere he describes the Spirit as Advocate, Teacher, Comforter, Encourager. Jesus says that, while the disciples will have to live in a time between having him physically present and experiencing the completion of his reign, they

will not be alone. Not only will they have each other, they will have the Spirit to guide them every step of the way.

It is good news for us as individuals and as a community of faith. Unfortunately we often confuse the Spirit with different aspects of our being. Some confuse emotional experiences with the Spirit, and we are too cognitive, we need more freedom to express emotions. But the Spirit is not relegated to the emotional realm, nor is the Spirit absent from cognitive matters. The Spirit is the very presence of the living God in all things, and this presence is experienced in, through and beyond every aspect of our being - thoughts, feelings, physical touch, and more! If we are to attend to the presence of the Spirit and allow the Spirit to guide us through times of transition, we must leave room for the Spirit to be more than we might think at first.

We must also be aware of the temptation to use careless language about the Spirit to add weight to our own ideas, as if they come straight from God. It is a frequent temptation in church life, in ministerial search processes, in times of transition, whenever a big decision is confronted. It is not that I think my gifts match this position, it is that the Spirit of God is leading. It is not that I think the church ought to do something specific, it is that the Spirit of God thinks so. It is not I, but the Spirit, and who can argue with the Spirit?

Of course, if the Spirit were to speak for herself, that would be different! But since we must ever discern the voice of the Spirit, our calling is to exercise more discipline. It's not that we should not seek the guidance of the Spirit, it's that we should seek that guidance humbly, not arrogantly assuming that what we think must be of God!

Yet, even recognizing the challenges we have in attending to the presence of the Spirit and discerning the guidance that is ours, the Spirit is a gift! In our individual and familial struggles, God is with us and for us, guiding us, whether we realize it or not, sustaining us even at those times when we think we are alone. In our shared life as a church, God is with us, leading each step of the way, when we are easy to lead and when we are as stubborn as the most bullheaded mule! Do we have the gifts, wisdom and commitment to face the future needs of this community? Maybe... but our predecessors did not prove faithful solely

on the basis of their merits. It was by the grace of God and with the aid of the Holy Spirit that First Baptist Church has come this far. And it is by this same grace and aid that we will move into the future.

Yet, there is at least one more thing the first disciples have in addition to each other and the Spirit; they have work to do. Jesus says the Spirit will come and the disciples will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. It may sound strange, but this is one of greatest gifts Jesus provides for anxious followers. He gives them something to do, and not just something, but something which gives meaning to their lives, something that provides continuity with their sacred memory and points them in the direction of their promise and hope! They will serve as witnesses to the kind of life Jesus has lived, a just and loving life; to the kind of death he died, self-giving and redemptive; and to the impossible possibility that he has been raised. They will, therefore, continue his work until he returns.

Part of the gift here is in having anything to do. When my mother died, my aunt came from England and was distressed over a decision we had made. We had said that, instead of flowers, people could honor mother's memory with gifts to two scholarship funds, and Aunt Bobbi kept saying over and over again, "People must have something to do with their hands." Finally, we realized that in England flowers given at death are grown in a garden and arranged by hand and given as a personal gift. When we told Bobbi that flowers in America come from a credit card being called in, and that the casserole brigade offers a personal expression of love, she was "O.K." But Bobbi was right. We must have something to do with our hands. In trying times, having something to do enables us to work through our feelings.

Yet Jesus does not just give the disciples something to do. He calls them to a task that lies in direct continuity with their experience with him and enables them to live toward the promise of his ultimate reign of justice and love. As they serve as witnesses, they allow their sacred memories to define each present day. And as they witness to the ends of the earth, they extend the possibility of God's reign to all people, which is their ultimate hope and ours. The implication is that it is in giving

ourselves to such work that we best respond to our anxiety and tension. We need each other, we need the help of God's Spirit, but we also need something to do that moves us in the direction of our promise and hope.

So, as individuals, we seek counseling when we need it, we evaluate our options when change comes, we work toward a healthier future. As a church, we work on how we teach and nurture faith, we develop new ministries to our community and world, we stay about the business of kingdom work by loving each other, practicing forgiveness, building relationships with people of other faiths, sending mission teams to various places. As we do, we have less time to worry about all the change that is taking place. I once saw a bumper sticker which read, "Jesus Is Coming! Look Busy!" It is good advice for many reasons.

In *The Lord of The Rings* there is a scene in which the band of travelers led by Frodo the Hobbit and Gandalf the Wizard struggle with the tension and anxiety of an in-between time. They have brought the one, most powerful ring this far and they rejoice in their success. But there is so far yet to go to reach the ultimate destination. Who should take the ring now? Will they be able to make it? And what will happen if they are not successful? Will the evil lord rule everything?

It is an anxious moment, but ultimately the characters respond to the anxiety with courage and vision. Three things sustain them not just in this moment but in the continuing journey. First, they are not alone, they have each other, they choose not one person but a group to carry the ring forward. Second, there is a larger purpose that guides them, a good intent more powerful than the evil spirit, not exactly a Holy Spirit, but something in this realm. Third, they have work to do, little time to sit and worry, an urgent push to continue the journey they began.

In many ways, this scene from a mythic world mirrors our own. We are on a journey with a purpose as individuals and as a community of faith. And, not to be overly dramatic, but there is both good and evil in this world, and sometimes we are not certain whether we will attain our goal. We live between memory and promise. But we have one another, we have the guidance of God's Spirit, and we have work to do. That was enough for the first disciples. And it is enough for us.