

**“How to Live in a Time
When There Is So Much We Just Don’t Know”
Acts 1:1-14
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On April 1 of this year, Baptist Joint Committee General Counsel Holly Hollman wrote an article providing guidance for how churches might think about the possibility of receiving federal funds from the COVID-19 relief package. She began by referencing a conversation she had a month or so earlier with a trusted friend in the medical world. When she asked her friend what she thought about reports that hospitals might be overwhelmed, her friend replied, “In more than twenty years of practicing medicine, I have never said “I don’t know’ more often than in the past few weeks.” That perspective shaped Hollman’s views on the potential benefits and entanglements of churches receiving federal funds.

We are living in a time when we just don’t know many things we would like to know. How long will this pandemic last? What criteria should we use for returning to normal activities, including worship? When will a vaccine be found? When will there be reliable treatments? Who is most at risk? What will the long-term economic impact be? If we begin to struggle financially as a church — which we have not so far, thanks to your generosity — should we consider receiving federal funds, something Baptists have been adamantly opposed to since our very beginning? As restaurants can now open, should we dine in them?

While we may feel like we have a basis upon which to make some decisions, the best answer to many of these questions is — we just don’t know. And to state the obvious — it is deeply unsettling to have so many unanswered questions at one time. Uncertainty is a part of life, and there are probably more unknowns at any given time than we are aware of or willing to acknowledge, but in this time, it seems like most things we would like to know are unclear. We seek out the best information every way we can, trying to find something to help us understand where we are, but we still have more questions than answers.

Perhaps the reading from Acts 1 can help us. It is the traditional reading for Ascension Day, May 21 this year, and to be clear, the primary focus is upon Jesus and his ascension into heaven. There are many reasons why this story is significant for the church. It offers an explanation for why the Risen Christ is no longer walking among us and it sets the stage for Christ's eternal reign. But as always in scripture, we can learn from the other people in the story.

The first disciples are living in a time with many unknowns. They have seen Jesus die and been devastated, but then they have interacted with the Risen Christ. What will happen next? Will the kingdom be restored to Israel? Are the end times at hand? And what are they supposed to do? Like us, they have been on an emotional roller coaster for some time, their reserves have been tapped, they don't have much left, and yet there are still so many questions. How they get through this experience may offer us guidance for this time of many unknowns.

One thing the disciples are told, by the Risen Christ himself, is to wait, to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the Spirit to be poured out on them. This will happen in the second chapter of Acts as new meaning is given to the Jewish festival of Pentecost. We know that story well. But for now, the disciples, who are a muddled mess of energy and exhaustion, enlightenment and confusion, are told to wait.

It's where we began our time of isolation, with words about waiting from Trey Davis, tied to the narrative of John 11. We didn't like it then. We don't like it now. We're a culture of instant gratification. We don't appreciate the value of waiting at any time, but this kind of waiting is maddening! Telling us we may have to wait weeks or months more before we can return to some activities is like telling our German Shepherds to wait at the door when we are getting ready for a walk. They may sit, since they are trained, and they may wait, but they will rock back and forth and get a little yappy, as Shepherds do, as may we.

And yet, the Biblical understanding of waiting involves more than simply allowing time to pass. It involves placing trust in God. It is not a passive endeavor. It is an act of faith. The prophet Isaiah says that those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up

with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” (Isaiah 40:31). Waiting for the Lord is trusting in God and the end result is strength to endure — not always an easy path, sometimes simply the ability to take one step at a time — but strength to endure.

So, the calling is to trust in God, but this is not to be confused with testing God. There are people right now that insist on ignoring safety measures like physical distancing, wearing masks and limiting numbers in groups. Some do so defiantly for various reasons, but quite a few, particularly in worship settings, claim that God will protect them.

It’s a bit like what the tempter said to Jesus after he took him to the pinnacle of the temple. “If you are the Son of God. Throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” (Luke 4:9b-11) God will protect you, he said, but what did Jesus say? “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” (Luke 4:12)

Trusting God does not mean taking ridiculous risks and expecting God to bail us out. God gives us brains and expects us to use them. But when we reach the limits of our wisdom, we rely upon God for guidance and strength, and God gives us what we need. So, in this strange period of unknowns, we don’t just let time pass, we lean into God’s care, a day at a time, as we pray each week – give us this day our daily bread – and we trust God with whatever comes in the future. Wait, not just for time to pass but for God to act, the first disciples are told, and so are we.

But this is not the only thing the first disciples are told. They are also told to set aside their questions about God’s realm; to allow the Spirit to fall on them; and to focus on their calling, which is to serve as Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. “It is not for you to know the times and periods God has set,” Jesus tells them. “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” two men in white robes ask them when Jesus ascends. In other words, quit obsessing over things you cannot comprehend and invest in your calling.

It is a helpful word for us in any time, but especially this time. It is tempting to obsess over questions about who to blame for this pandemic. Should we may blame China and the WHO, the current administration or the CDC? Should we blame liberal media, conservative media, climate change or the deep state? There are some questions that will need to be addressed by informed experts in order to prepare for future challenges, but there is very little any of us can do in this regard and very little chance that our understanding will be complete.

And in addition to the scientific and political questions of why, the usual suspects have come forward with the typical spiritual questions and explanations. God is judging us, of course, for certain sins, the same “sins” such folks always point to while ignoring their own. As is the case with testing God, we have Jesus’ opinion on whether God punishes people for sin. In Luke 13, when Jesus is asked if some Galileans who were killed along with their sacrifices by Pilate suffered because they were worse sinners, his answer is — no (Luke 13:1-3). He goes on to advise people to get their lives in order, but when asked if suffering is the result of sin, here and elsewhere, he says rather bluntly — no!

If God is going to punish us for sin, we are all in trouble, but this is not how God relates to us. God comes in grace, this is the Jesus story, from beginning to end. One wonders how people who claim to believe in and follow him consistently ignore so many of his teachings.

But the point is obsessing over certain questions right now isn’t very productive. In fact, it tends to intensify our anxiety. So, as the first disciples are called to leave the questions and engage in service, so are we. We are called to allow the Spirit to fall on us in full and then be witnesses to who Jesus is in all the world, beginning with where we are. So how do we do that? How do we speak and live in a way that points to the true character of Christ? By demanding our rights to gather for worship, as some have done, appealing to the First Amendment, or by choosing to act in ways that care for the most vulnerable among us?

Baptists, of all people, care deeply about the religious freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment. Our forbearers argued for these provisions. Some of them suffered and died for these provisions. But is this really a First Amendment issue? I ask not from a legal perspective,

but from a spiritual one. Do we not have a higher calling to love our neighbor, no matter what we may think we have a legal right to do?

On March 25 of this year, when there was public debate as to whether churches should gather for worship on Easter, Melissa Florer-Bixler, who is pastor of the Raleigh Moravian Church, wrote a powerful article published by *Sojourners* in which she said this.

Our church will not meet in person because we love Judy, an octogenarian artist whose yard is dotted with the metal sculptures she welds in her home studio. We won't gather because we can't imagine life without David, a cancer survivor who strums the guitar on Sunday mornings. We won't have in-person worship because there are millions of people who we don't know, people who are beloved children of God, and the possibility of their infection increases if we spread the virus among us and others.

She went on to acknowledge that while the Bible consistently calls God's people to worship, the prophets often critique blind adherence to ritual at the expense of human need. Isaiah expresses rage at religious leaders who insist upon sacrificing animals in ritual worship while the Assyrians are besieging the land and people are starving. "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?" God asks, what I desire is that you "cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." (Isaiah 1:11a, 16c-17)

The prophet Micah says that what God desires from us is not ritual sacrifice but that we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:6-8). We can pick and choose scripture to support various positions on any issue, but the weight of the Biblical witness on this issue is clear — human needs are more important than rituals. Right now, the best way we honor God is by protecting the needs of the vulnerable.

In a time with many unknowns and a complex mixture of powerful emotions, the first disciples of Jesus are told to wait in faithful trust for God to act and to set aside unanswerable questions so that they can give

witness to the love of God revealed in Christ. It is good counsel for us in this time when there is so much we just don't know; we can trust God, and the busier we are in witness and love, the faster this time will pass.