

“Guidance for How to Navigate this Time of Transition”

Acts 1:1–11

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May 16, 2021

After over a year of pandemic-related limitations, it is wonderful to be at a place where we can finally begin to resume some normal activities, especially here in the church! Most of us are beyond weary of all the COVID restrictions. And yet, as Dennis Ellis pointed out at a meeting some time ago, reentry may be just as difficult as launch. As spacecrafts face about as many challenges when they reenter the earth’s atmosphere as they do when they are launched, we face as many challenges coming out of COVID as we did going into it.

We cannot go from 0 to 60. We have to ease back into things, and to be honest, it feels like there are more decisions to be made now than there were a year ago. It may seem like the CDC announcement on Thursday, loosening restrictions, followed by Governor Cooper’s announcement Friday, makes things easier. It does not. We still make our own decisions. Children cannot get a vaccine yet and we cannot guarantee that unmasked adults have all been vaccinated. So, we are still taking precautions and we probably will be functioning as a hybrid church for some time — in person for some people, virtual for others.

We are in a time of transition. We’re not where we were six months ago, but we are not where we are going to be, and it’s not even clear where that is. In such a time, there are mixed emotions — joy and anxiety — there are many questions — about what we can and should do — and as a result, we are stressed — “we” as a staff and as a church.

It is a situation very much like the one the first disciples encounter in our reading from Acts 1. We recognize this as the story of Jesus’ ascension into heaven. It is a narrative that explains why the resurrected Christ is no longer with us in physical form, but much of the story focuses on the disciples, their processing of this moment of transition, and Jesus’ response to their need. Perhaps there are things we can learn from their experience that might help us navigate this time of transition.

One thing we can learn from the first disciples is that different emotions and questions are okay in a time like this — indeed, they are to be expected. The first disciples are overjoyed that Jesus has been raised, but he is about to leave them again. He promises the gift of the Spirit, his continuing presence in another way, but they haven't experienced this yet. They don't know what it will be like. So, they are anxious and fearful, perhaps a little sad too.

They have been on an emotional rollercoaster for some time now — sharing in his ministry, grieving at his death, being overjoyed by his resurrection. Just when life seems to be settling down, all you-know-what is about to break loose again, at least inside of them. They are joyful, anxious and sad, all at the same time!

And in this time, they quite naturally begin to ask questions. “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” they ask Jesus. We may wonder why these folks always ask such dumb questions, why they can't ever seem to follow what Jesus is saying. He isn't going build a kingdom in this world, at least not one the world recognizes, a political entity. His realm is in and through the human heart. Don't they know that by now?

Well, they have heard what he has said, but long before they knew him, they learned many things about how God worked in the past with the Israelites, they developed basic assumptions that are difficult to discard because they are thought to be sacred. Jesus' path has taken many strange turns, but he is alive again. Maybe now he will finally fulfill their expectations. They ask questions that make sense to them.

So, from the early disciples, we learn that it is okay to experience different emotions and ask various questions at a time like this. We feel what we feel at any point, and at this point there are many reasons for celebration and concern. We may lean in one direction, but it will be a rare and perhaps uninformed person who does not have mixed emotions.

We also ask questions because we don't know what the future holds and thus what is wise to do. Some are still wondering whether to get a vaccine. Parents experience even more anxiety over the question of whether they will allow their children to be vaccinated. What activities should we participate in and allow our children to? What are

the relative risks of illness and social isolation? Asking questions in a time like this is essential. It is the way we get to a better place, even if we look back later and wonder why we asked that question then.

We learn from the first disciples' experience that different emotions and various questions are okay at a time like this. We also learn that we are never alone. The Spirit of God is with us. Jesus may be ascending to heaven, but the Holy Spirit will come upon the disciples in just a few days, on Pentecost. As John baptized with water, they will be baptized with the Spirit. They will not be alone nor will they be emptyhanded on their journey. God's Spirit will bring them power!

It is a word of assurance just when they need it, a word we have heard again and again during this pandemic, as scripture has reminded us repeatedly that we can place our trust in God, even in the midst of difficult times, because God is with us always, renewing our strength.

There have been three primary themes that have emerged in our shared life during COVID-19: we can trust God with our lives, we have a responsibility and privilege to care for one another even in a time of isolation, and we have a calling to pursue justice in the world around us. All three themes lie at the heart of our faith, but the first of these three is the foundation of them all. Our basic trust in God is what gives rise to our acts of kindness and compassion, justice and mercy.

We have had many opportunities to deepen our trust over the past fourteen months. It is easy to say we trust in God when all of our basic needs are met and we don't have any serious challenges. We can make a pious claim, even put it on a license plate or bumper sticker, while in truth actually never thinking we need any help from beyond ourselves. Most of us just don't worry in normal times about many things. We certainly don't worry about where our next meal is coming from.

But in times of challenge, we do worry. Those who grew up during the Great Depression never lose that existential fear that enough may not be enough. And during this pandemic we have all had given realities taken away from us — community, work, normal routines and activities. We have had to deepen our trust in God to remain hopeful, and we have had time to deepen our trust in God.

A simple petition we pray every week summarizes our need and our faith. “Give us this day our daily bread,” we pray. It is a request for a basic necessity, but it is only made one day at a time. We only ask God for what we need today because we trust God to provide what we need tomorrow. This is the way we are called to live as individuals, as families and as a church, and the gift of the Holy Spirit Jesus promises his followers enables us to fulfill this calling.

There is at least one other thing we learn from the disciples’ experience. Jesus not only assures them they will not be left alone; he gives them work to do. They are to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. They are to tell others who he is, and they are to continue his ministry in this world.

Evidence for this latter claim is found throughout our reading. First, the book of Acts begins with the author saying that in his first book, the Gospel According to Luke, he wrote about what Jesus began to do and teach. In this book, he will write about what his followers, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit, will do in continuing his ministry. Second, everything about this story reflects a pattern in the Hebrew canon wherein key figures hand over their work to a successor — Moses to Joshua, Elijah to Elisha — and in the process convey wisdom and power. Elijah actually ascends to heaven, just like Jesus.

There is no single successor to Jesus, but we are all called to be his witnesses, to continue his ministry of love and justice, healing and hope. As the angelic figures tell the first disciples, there is no time to be looking up to heaven to see when it will all end. Jesus will come back, and in the meantime, there is work to do, witness to give, healing to provide, hungry people to feed, injustice to address. If we understand the scope of our calling, it can feel overwhelming, but we are not alone in the work, there is joy in it, and it can focus us in a time like this.

I have shared with some of you before a story about a time in another setting when we learned that some of our youth were sneaking out a classroom window after Sunday School and going on top of a three-story building. The roof was flat, but the building was high, so we could not let this go. The deacon chair and I went to the youth Sunday

School assembly and talked with the youth. We tried to be straightforward without being overbearing. We just couldn't have them up on the roof. They had a question or two but, all in all, the youth were fine. In fact, they expected adult intervention at some point.

Some of their parents, however, those who had grown up in the church, were offended that we talked with the youth. "What's the big deal?" they asked, "We climbed up on that roof when we were kids." We were startled by this response, but once we recovered from the initial shock, I asked the parents, "So, what happened when you were caught? How did your parents respond?" "Oh," they replied, "Our parents let us have it! We were never allowed on that roof again! It wasn't safe!"

"Hmm..." I replied, the wheels spinning, "I know this may be difficult for you to imagine, but you are now the parents in this present-day story and thus, you are the ones who are supposed to understand why we have to rein in this behavior before someone gets hurt!" They got the message and received it well.

It always seems to come as a shock when we discover that we are now the ones with the responsibility. We are now parents of teenagers, we are now the adults in this scenario, or for all of us at some point, we are now the oldest generation alive in our family. When we are young, we cannot imagine growing old, we live with the mindset that there will always be someone older, wiser, more responsible. But time passes and one day we realize that we are the ones with the responsibility now.

The same thing happens in the church. We are the ones with the responsibility now of continuing Jesus' work — the great traditions of this church, but more than that, the broader callings of God's realm. This may seem overwhelming, but it is also exciting, and it focuses us in a time like this. Rather than being consumed by our conflictual emotions and difficult questions — some of which may be as unanswerable as the question of when and how Jesus will return — we can lose ourselves in witness and ministry, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. That is a helpful word of guidance in a time like this.