

Reading from the New Testament: Acts 1:6-14

Nurturing the Moment

Sunday, June 5, 2011

The Rev. Tom Hagood

When was the last time you saw something that really knocked you off your feet ... something that just amazed you ... overwhelmed you ... that took your breath away? Have you ever had that kind of a moment?

Back in the old days when I was a teenager in Florida ... I was quite the space junkie. I loved anything that flew into the air with fire coming out of one end of it. I'd often take my friends down to the Saturn V moon launches at Cape Kennedy. We'd camp on the beach with literally hundreds of thousands of other people ... all vying for the best view of the launch pad just across the Intercoastal Waterway. It was like one massive outdoor party in which everyone was intimately connected to the same event.

Can you imagine what it was like as everyone joined in the countdown ... all those eyes focused on one spot? First you saw the massive flames and clouds of smoke and a few seconds later the sound of those roaring engines smacked right into you. As that massive three-stage rocket began its skyward climb ... it was truly a moment that filled you with awe.

All around you ... people would be screaming out the exact same thing ... Go! Go! Go, Baby Go! Thousands of people ... all staring into the sky ... watching that rocket grow smaller and smaller as it raced into space. Eventually it was just a tiny spot of white light ... and then it was gone. But even after it was out of sight ... people still stared upwards ... still hoping to catch one last sight of the rocket ... staring into the sky.

They hadn't come to watch a moon launch ... but Jesus' disciples were all gathered together on the Mount of Olives, also staring up into the sky. They, too, were quite excited. Their Lord and Savior ... the Messiah ... had just been lifted up into the clouds ... Jesus had ascended ... and as they stood there ... staring upwards ... with great anticipation ... they wondered when he would come back down again. With that image in our minds ... open your hearts to the word of our Lord from Book of Acts, chapter 1, verses 6-14.

I will be reading from the New Revised Standard Version. Out of respect for the word of our Lord, those who are able, please stand for our reading.

1:6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

1:7 He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.

1:8 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."

1:9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

1:10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.

1:11 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."

1:12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away.

1:13 When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James.

1:14 All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

This is the Word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Even after everything they had been through ... from the beginning when Jesus called them to drop their nets and follow him ... after witnessing all of those miracles ... after hearing his powerful words that challenged everything about their way of life ... and then even being with him after he rose from the dead ... after all of that ... they still don't get it.

Just as Jesus is about to ascend in the heavens ... there is only one thing on their minds ... the question on their minds is still ... *when will the kingdom of Israel be restored?* They're still waiting on a Messiah who will be an earthly ruler ... who will make Israel great again ... who will release the people from oppression.

I can only imagine the disappointment Jesus must have felt at that moment. Everything was now in motion ... he was leaving them and they still had their feet set on earthly goals ... not spiritual goals. It reminds me of that story about the conversation Jesus had with the angel Gabriel when he returned to heaven ... Upon his return to heaven, Jesus was welcomed by a host of angels.

The angel Gabriel approached Jesus and asked, "Master, now that you're home, what is your plan for continuing the work you began on earth?" "Well, I left Peter in charge. I told my disciples to wait in the city until the Spirit comes. Then they'll have the power and motivation to be my witnesses all over the world. Peter, James, John, Mary and Martha, and all the others will tell

people about me and my mission. Those who are told will tell others, and the good news will be spread throughout the earth. Ultimately, all humanity will know about my love."

Gabriel frowned and looked rather skeptical. He knew about human limitation, weakness and failure. He asked, "But what if Peter denies you again? What if James and John can't get along? What if Mary and Martha grow weary? What if they all run away again in the face of persecution? What if the people who come after them forget what you taught them? Do you have an alternate plan?"

Jesus answered, "No. I'm counting on them. I plan to build my church on them. I plan to feed the hungry and clothe the needy in Jerusalem through them. I plan to befriend the outcasts in Samaria through them. I plan to right injustice and bring peace to all the world through them! I plan to save the world and build the kingdom of God on earth through their words, their actions and character. I told them, you are my body. You have my spirit. You will do greater works than I... You can do it!"

Gabriel was still concerned and said: "Master, perhaps you should have made other arrangements, Plan B, just in case."

Jesus answered: "Gabriel, there is no other plan."

So there ... on a hillside overlooking the city of Jerusalem ... with no other plan ... the disciples stand there staring into the sky. That's when these two guys in white coats show up. Now I could make a cute joke about that ... but these two guys are actually heavenly messengers who have come to remind the disciples to quit looking up in the sky for Jesus ... he's gone ... but he will be back.

And for some reason ... I'll call it providence ... or some sort of divine inspiration ... but a light bulb finally turns on ... and the disciples now realize what they have to do. They're going to have to wait. That's it ... simply just wait. There is nothing they can do. They don't have to write a Book of Order ... they don't have to build a church ... they don't have to organize a potluck ... they can even forget about holding a session meeting. All they have to do is wait ... wait to receive the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus has promised them. It's that simple.

Yet it is one of the most important stories in the entire New Testament ... as the disciples go back to their little upper room in Jerusalem ... just to wait and pray.

Now let's be honest. We really don't like to wait. Who does? After all ... our culture downplays waiting. Most of us are quite impatient. Immediate gratification is the rule of the day. Who has time to sit and wait ... we want action. We want results. And we want them now. What good could possibly come out of wasting perfectly good time with waiting? Even Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote ... "How much of human life is lost in waiting?" (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Essay 7, *Prudence*.)

Jesus knew what he was doing. He also knew his disciples. They had to learn to wait ... that's all they could do ... they had to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Before Jesus could send them out into the great wide world ... they had to learn to be patient and wait ... spending their time in prayer ... opening themselves up to what God had for them to do ... and letting go of what they thought they had to do.

That kind of preparation doesn't happen in an instant ... it takes time ... it actually becomes a lifelong journey ... a process ... a spiritual practice in which we find time to wait for the Lord to lead us ... by emptying ourselves of our own selfish desires ... by revealing our true selves to God ... the good and the ugly ... and then beginning when we're ready ... filled by the Holy Spirit in order to do God's will.

And it all happens in God's good time. The good news is ... that over time ... learning to wait on the Lord ... learning to wait on the Holy Spirit ... becomes a wonderful and yet mysterious part of our Christian journey.

It was Henri Nouwen who wrote ... "A waiting person is a patient person. The word "patience" means the willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the full in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us. Impatient people are always expecting the real thing to happen somewhere else and therefore want to go elsewhere. The moment is empty. But patient people dare to stay where they are. Patient living means to live actively in the present and wait there. Waiting, then, is not passive. It involves nurturing the moment, as a mother nurtures the child that is growing in her womb. (Henri Nouwen, *Eternal Seasons: A Spiritual Journey Through the Church's Year* (ht))

I love that expression ... "nurturing the moment." Because in doing so ... waiting actually becomes a place where there is growth ... new spiritual growth in our lives ... it is a place where God is about to reveal something new to us ... a place of expectant hope ... and a place where we are changed just a little bit at a time into the image of Jesus Christ we are called to be.

Nurturing the moment means letting the Holy Spirit open us up to all kinds of new possibilities ... those times when God is going to do something new in our lives ... and in the lives of this community we call the church.

Nurturing then becomes an act of trust ... trusting that God is providing all that is necessary for us to be who we are called to be ... nothing more ... and nothing less. And when we learn what it is to nurture the moment ... we can even stand in the middle of the chaos of life ... those times when we feel we are about to be drowned in the storms that batter us ... those times when we are surrounded by the shadows of fear that keep us awake at night ... and we can let go of our anxiety and our fears ... as we wait on the Lord.

Okay ... all that sounds so good ... but you might be asking ... how do I go about doing it ... how do I learn how to wait ... to wait on the Lord ... how do I nurture the moment and trust God's love and care? Well ... quite simply ... if you're going to learn to wait on the Lord ... it will take time ... remember that it is a lifetime journey ... It will take time to learn how to open your heart to the Lord in prayer ... sharing with your Creator all the stuff you hold inside ... all the wounds

you have experienced in life ... all the times you have hurt others ... and then turning all that over to the Lord.

It will take time to listen for the revelation of God's Spirit to you through the daily and disciplined reading of scripture ... as you begin to experience the Bible not as an old history book written long ago ... but as a living text that speaks to your life here and now. It will take time to learn to shut out the noise of this world and to sit quietly with the Lord ... in a place of your own choosing ... maybe sitting on your porch ... maybe at a Taize prayer service ... in which you can begin to listen to God speaking to you in ways that only you will know.

And it will take time to learn to trust God to lead your life ... to start to understand that the kingdom of Israel, whatever that may mean in your life, is not as important as the kingdom of God ... to begin to accept that only by the love and grace of Jesus Christ are you able to accomplish anything in this world. But that is only the beginning ... of that mysterious and wondrous journey with the Lord.

Your session and its elders are learning to wait and listen for the Holy Spirit to guide them as they seek God's vision for Columbia Presbyterian Church ... the new committee structure in the church is also using spiritual disciplines to wait and listen for God as we discern what God is calling us to do and be here at Columbia. There will be other opportunities made available to you in the coming weeks for you to learn other spiritual practices of waiting and discerning God's will.

I pray you will be open to these opportunities ... that you will participate in them ... and that together we will find the time ... individually and as a congregation ... to wait on the Lord.

I suspect the prophet Isaiah understood this kind of spiritual journey when he told the people living in exile ... people who had waited and waited a very long time ... "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but 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 40:28-31)

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.