

**Prayer before sermon:** Lord, we thank you for the gift of your Word and as we think on these things, open our hearts and our minds to hear you. Amen.

I am grateful for this opportunity to talk today on the topic of: **The Transformative Power of Waiting...Together** as we explore the reading from Acts.

So...how did you all feel when it came time for the sermon and I went and sat and didn't come up to the pulpit?

Was it awkward or embarrassing?

Did you find yourself feeling a little stressed out about what was going to happen or not happen?

Did you feel an urge to take action?

Did you feel alone in your thoughts or did you feel the presence of those around you? a solidarity of shared uneasiness?

I don't think I know anyone who really likes to wait.

Waiting is a term that covers a broad range... There are those relatively small and often annoying waits that occur in our day to day life like: waiting in line... waiting for the computer to boot up... waiting for exam results from school... waiting for recess!

Then there are the bigger waits like: waiting to grow as a church... waiting for the political winds to change... waiting for the lens of equity to take hold... waiting for shelter when you live w/o housing... waiting for test results after a biopsy... waiting to be fed when you are hungry with no sign of food.....or waiting for an answer to a prayer.

Waiting can be **really, really** hard and, at times, it can even test our faith. It's especially challenging when there is no foreseeable end to the waiting.

In today's reading from Acts 1, there are two significant acts of waiting: there is the apostles waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit from God and, once Jesus ascends, the start of the wait for his return.

Please open your bulletins to the reading from Acts, so you have it for reference over our time together this morning.

Although waiting can be really difficult, if we look closely at this reading, there is some powerful guidance on how to turn that frustration, worry and even fear into a truly transformative process.

Maybe that's why the Bible talks so much about waiting. Perhaps God wants us to know that waiting is not meant to be something we do w/o thought or engagement. Waiting *actively* can cultivate good fruit in our lives. I think waiting is one of God's tools for developing people and community!

I'd like to dig a little deeper into some of that good fruit that can come from that time in between...

**1. During the wait, some critical pieces may fall into place and our mission may become more clear**

For the apostles, there was much to contemplate as they waited. This was not an easy mission they were given. Learning that they will be witnessing in the Holy City of Jerusalem and the surrounding area of Judea was probably not too great a surprise. However, hearing that they would be witnessing in Samaria would've been quite a shock as the Samaritans were regarded as **apostates**, people w/o faith, and they were not great supporters of Jesus to be sure.

The next surprise would've been "the ends of the earth" piece. The Jewish people thought of other nations and the Gentiles who lived there, as lower forms of life. This was a challenge to all norms and conventions. Not only that, but they were also being asked to ultimately go into places unknown. If they weren't already there, I can imagine that this takes them right out of their comfort zone.

Knowing this, our caring God recognized that they would need time to process this huge task.

I mean, presumably, they could have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit at the ascension. Instead, God is having them wait...together...in Jerusalem. A wise and loving God indeed.

What were the apostles must feeling as they made the walk back to Jerusalem that day? The reading from Acts does not comment on their inner or outer state. It is left for us to imagine. However, in Luke, they are described as having great joy. I can buy that. However, call me a skeptic, but I think there had to have been at least an element of fear in their minds. Fear would be a natural response when you are told you are going to be doing something that is really difficult and with a scope beyond comprehension **AND** you have just said goodbye to the physical presence of YOUR SAVIOR by your side.

Try to imagine that you were given this kind of news and then simply, told to go home and wait. It is so easy for fear to become exaggerated when we are left to our own thoughts. (world's worse punishment for my children – go to your room [alone] and think about what you've done [alone] – oh, and also, with no firm timeline about when we might come in to talk about it with them) Our own heads can be a very scary place sometimes.

Fear and stress thrives when we see ourselves as separate from others. In our world today, there is has been a loss of our sense of communal connection and, whether we know it or not, we are hungry for it. The value of independence has been prioritized to the extent that we are left largely on our own to manage our increasingly complex lives. This independence can lead us to feel that we are separate from **or** different from others. We can begin to think that we are special or, conversely, not special enough – either way, fear of others or feelings of stress or anxiety can arise.

**BUT**, when we remember that we are all human beings and children of God – we find that we are all connected to one another. When we see others as connected to us and to God, we are better able to rise to new challenges.

This is the beauty of God's plan – the apostles were not left alone. Jesus knew what they needed – to stay in Jerusalem, *all together*, to wait. **All of them** “with

**one accord” continued steadfastly in prayer.** The Greek version translates to: devoting themselves with one mind to prayer. Through communal prayer and living, they likely built confidence and their sense of community in their new normal, that is, w/o the physical presence of Jesus. I believe that God knew they needed to experience this and know it in order to gain clarity and fulfill their mission as powerful witnesses to Christ.

There is great power in prayer that takes place in community. Here at Lake Edge there are multiple ways to engage in communal prayer – Sunday mornings, Thursday mornings, and a prayer chain, to name a few.

Even though, just as the Apostles, we bring our own uniqueness – our own personality, we can find unity with one another that comes from our common devotion to Christ.

## **2. During the wait, our character can undergo transformation – another fruit**

In both the Apostles’ wait for the Holy Spirit and our wait for Jesus’ return, we can see this play out.

In Luke’s version of the uncertainty about the timing of Christ’s return...he said, “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” (Luke 21:34-36)

In this passage, Luke lists dissipation (a.k.a., engagement in shallow pursuits), drunkenness, and worries of life as being things that can weigh down our hearts and then, we will not be ready and alert when we next stand before Jesus. I think that not always, but often, worry is at the root of these shallow pursuits and/or over-consumption – it is our misguided effort to numb ourselves to our propensity toward anxiety.

During the wait, the Apostles instead, engaged and devoted themselves to prayer. Once again, the support of each other was likely invaluable.

During times of waiting, we are often called upon to look inward, to engage in honest self-exploration and learning, and ultimately, to step up in one way or another. As we've said, waiting does not have to be passive.

In our reading, two men in white robes – angelic messengers – seemed to ask this of the Apostles when they said, “why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”, seeming to imply, “Don't just stand around looking at the sky while you are waiting for Him to return.” They have things to do.

We have seen this play out in recent months since the presidential election. People who feel strongly against the current administration, are in a place of *imposed waiting* that has no certain end. As we have been exploring, this can be a place of great anxiety and stress. During this time, many people are not just sitting passively, waiting for it to end. Instead, they are taking this time to both turn inward and also reach out to connect with others in community and thus, acting from a place of reflection.

On to a third fruit...

### **3. During the wait, we can exercise and build our patience muscles**

Did the Apostles struggle with the same influences we are confronted with today? As we are quite aware of, there is little recognition for waiting in today's world. The impatience of the “go-getters attitude” is heavily reinforced; innovation, drive, and “success” are revered. Would **we** have taken this time to wait and pray? OR Would we have tried to measure the value of waiting and found it unworthy, thinking, ‘I can get his done bigger, better, faster with my own spin on the plan...now!’

In my reading I came upon this great quote from Arden Mahlberg with regard to waiting and patience:

"Spiritually, we are also at risk of filling in the blanks. The Quakers have the term that helps them resist the urge while acknowledging it (they call it): "**outrunning one's guide.**" We are being guided by Spirit, but we are

impatient. We think we see where it is going and we run ahead like overexcited children. And when we run ahead, **we stop listening**. We justify this by making it a virtue, that to believe what we don't know for sure is an expression of faith, instead of faith being **the ability to wait for guidance and follow as it leads rather than making assumptions and running ahead.**"

To engage expectantly, as a community, in prayer, while we wait for God's direction and guidance is an act of holiness.

#### 4. During the wait, we can cultivate trust

As the Apostles go into the period of waiting for the Holy Spirit they are told about some pretty powerful things that will happen – they have no proof, no timeline, no details, just that it will happen. In other words, they are placed in a position of trusting or not trusting God's word.

Can you imagine the questions the Apostles must have had? And then, before they can even formulate the questions on their lips, they watched as Jesus was lifted up in the sky and obscured by a cloud so that they could no longer see Him. Poof! The one person who could have answered their questions is seemingly gone.

Even under these circumstances, however, the apostles trust that what Jesus has said **WILL** happen.

**That is a lot of trust.** It's easy to say that we trust in God, but it can be difficult to carry that trust through a long waiting period and hold onto our belief that what God says will happen will indeed happen. Our responses to delays, frustrations, and difficult situations in our daily lives often reveal that we are not placing our hope in God.

When we choose to wait quietly and trustingly, we not only honor God, we encourage others to put their hope in him as well.

One more fruit to discuss in our wait time...

## 5. During the wait, we can enjoy mounting anticipation

There is a palpable sense of anticipation that permeates this text.

Expectations are very high and stoked by the evolving awareness that God changed everything on the original Easter morning. Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior died, was buried and rose again!! In this reading, we continue the story of Jesus' life but this time, **Jesus will not be confined to one body – He will send His Spirit to dwell in believers, and together, they will be His body.** Jesus didn't exit, he is now going to be present throughout all creation, in the Holy Spirit. Acts is one exciting sequel to the Gospel of Luke! The apostles must have savored the promise of the angels, "he'll be back – just as you saw him go" ... and felt reassured during their time of waiting.

John mentions that wonderful reunion several times in his letter and urges us to 'continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming' (1 John 2:28).

Years ago, our family spent a year in England on a teacher exchange. During that year, we experienced the gift of deep friendship – safe to say...a feeling of *chosen family* ...with a number of people there. It has been 16 years since we left and we have had many visits back and forth. Each time they visit or we visit, there is a great sadness when it comes time to say 'goodbye' at the airport. However, we remind ourselves that it will be in an airport when we'll meet them again the next time. In the meantime, we get to enjoy the anticipation of when we will meet again. The knowledge that we will meet them again gives us the encouragement we need to stay in touch with them; to be **attentive** to the relationships we share with one another.

During the wait, the Apostles were conditioned to be attentive to God – they were in a constant state of readiness to respond when the time came. **Living with this kind of impending change requires great courage.** They wait, knowing that God is coming with big gifts to equip them in their important roles ahead.

Just think if we could enter worship each Sunday with this sense of expectation of God's presence and the anticipation of the touch of the Holy Spirit! Think how that could flow into our interactions with others over coffee prior to the service. Not to mention when we leave worship to bring the good news into our communities. That kind of enthusiasm and wonder is infectious in such a good way!

#### Conclusion:

This reading certainly establishes Jesus as Lord of all and calls Christians to participate boldly in his ongoing presence among us. However, and perhaps just as importantly, it provides us with a model for doing so. We must begin first by waiting – actively...expectantly... in prayer...together. Let's use our moments of waiting, whether brief or lengthy to engage with God and community so that we might gain clarity in our mission, grow in our character... while cultivating patience and trust, and build anticipation and enthusiasm in Christ. When we use our wait time in this way, we cannot help but develop our faith, drawing closer to God and one another. We cannot help but be transformed...together.

Then, when we feel the power and urgings of the Holy Spirit, we can go forth with the strength of community behind or beside us, and bear witness to others through our actions, our words, and our sometimes quiet, but always bold and determined faith. In this way, we can use the example set by the apostles, who started where they were, and gradually spread the Gospel in concentric circles outward, until the whole world was encompassed, as a model for the church today. AMEN

### Children's sermon:

Today is the last Sunday of Easter in the church year. During this last week of Easter, the church celebrates the Ascension of Christ. Does anyone know what ascension means? (wait for answer) It means going up or rising. This balloon that I'm holding is trying to ascend.

That is just what Jesus did, he ascended. After his he died on the cross and was resurrected, Jesus appeared to his disciples at different times for about a month. He told them that he would be going home to heaven, returning to the Father, and that the Holy Spirit would come to them.

What will happen if I let this balloon go? (it will rise up, won't it?) Will it ever come back down? Eventually, it will – you know the saying, "What goes up, must come down." The helium inside eventually seeps out and the balloon comes back down. If I let it go now, does anyone know exactly when it will drift back down again? No we don't know for sure.

Jesus also told his disciples that he would be back someday. He didn't tell them when, but he promised to return.

Have you ever lost a balloon, or seen someone let go of one? (wait for stories) They'll stand there watching the balloon go up and up until they can't see it anymore. If it's a little child who has lost the balloon, there may be some tears.

When Jesus went up into heaven, his disciples were watching. They watched him disappear into a cloud and then they all just stood there, looking up, staring at the sky, until two angels appeared and told them that Jesus would come back some day. The disciples were probably very sad to see Jesus go, and I'm sure they couldn't help standing there, staring for a while. Do you think they were supposed to just stay there, looking up, waiting for Jesus to come back? No, there was plenty to do while they waited for Jesus to return. The world was waiting to hear the good news, that Jesus was alive!

We can let this balloon go, watch it rise up, and probably sometime during the next few days it will float down. Now when you look at that balloon, remember that while we wait for Jesus to return, we can tell people the good news.

*Prayer: Thank you Jesus, for your promise that one day you will return. While we wait, help us to spread the good news of your love.*