

Ascension of Our Lord

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Acts 1: 1-11 and Luke 24: 44-53

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Decorah, Iowa

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Stay. Wait. Receive.

Those are key words from Jesus' last instructions to his disciples in the Gospel of Luke, our Gospel reading for today. The author of Luke must have seen these words as really important because he repeated them as he began his second book, the book of Acts - in the portion of Acts that was our first reading today. According to Luke and Acts, as Jesus left the disciples he told them to **stay** in Jerusalem and **wait** there to **receive** the promised Holy Spirit.

Stay. Wait. Receive.

These are important words for us to hear as well. In a culture that stresses action, productivity and self sufficiency, sometimes Jesus calls us to be still, to wait for God and to receive what God will provide.

This isn't what we'd expect Jesus to say as his last words to disciples though. You'd think that as Jesus was leaving and passing on his work to them, he wouldn't want the disciples to just sit around waiting to receive - that sounds so passive. You'd think he'd give them much more action-oriented instructions - that he'd stress words like Go. Baptize. Teach. And in fact, in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus is remembered as offering those active instructions. In Matthew, Jesus' last words to his disciples are, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." This seems much more clear and direct and important - go and do.

We have no way of knowing exactly what Jesus' last words were. I'm guessing he probably conveyed both messages after his resurrection before he ascended to God. But the author of each gospel heard and passed on Jesus' story with an awareness of what his community needed to hear. The message, "go and do", was what Matthew's community needed to hear. The author of Luke and Acts certainly knew the importance of action; the whole book of Acts is about the Acts (the actions) of the Apostles - all the ways they **did** go and do. Yet, Luke and Acts help us to see that before we rush out into action, it's important to pause and wait for God to provide what we need for the action. The instructions to pause and wait must have been hard for the disciples to hear. They wanted action.

They asked Jesus if this was the time he would restore the kingdom to Israel. They seemed to be tired of waiting for Jesus to free Israel from Roman occupation and make Israel an independent kingdom again. They wanted action and they likely wanted to be part of that action - to make progress and see results. It must have been frustrating to hear that they had to wait. The disciples also may have wanted to act in order to deal with the anxiety and grief they faced as Jesus left them. In Luke's account they seemed to cope better with the changes than in Acts where they were left staring up into heaven after Jesus. I'm guessing they probably would have preferred more clear, direct and active instructions as they adjusted to new realities and tried to figure out what to do next.

When we're anxious we often want things to be clear cut, black and white. Instead they were told to stay, wait and receive - more ambiguous, passive instructions that are actually quite challenging. We often prefer to be busy and productive. These days, it can also feel like what life demands of us. Staying busy is such a common coping mechanism as we face anxiety, loss and transition. When a loss diminishes our ability to do as much as we'd like, we experience added grief. We often want to be active and productive when we consider the problems of the world. When we think about issues like climate change, that we'll talk about today in Adult Forum, we want to take action and make a difference. This impulse is good yet sometimes we're driven more by a desire to just do something, even if it's wrong, then we are led by God's Spirit. When we rush into action for action's sake we can act in unhelpful ways and we can struggle to sustain our commitment over the long haul.

It's certainly important to "go and do" as we see in Matthew and Acts, but we are also called to stay, wait and receive. We are called to pause and look to God. We are asked to draw upon God's Spirit rather than our own productivity as we address the challenges of our lives and our world. How does this happen for us? Often this happens when we pay attention to the losses in our lives - when we allow ourselves to really experience the grief of a death, a broken relationship, a health issue, a job change, a lost dream, or the state of the world - rather than rushing to do something. As we do this, we often find that our losses and times of diminished productivity allow more space for God to work in and through us. We also grow in our capacity to stay, wait and receive when we tend to relationships with one another. Relationships teach us to pause and listen, to be patient and present with others. As we do this, we grow more open to the Spirit of God leading us to wise and life-giving action.

Worship, prayer, music and other art also help us pause and receive. So today I offer the poem, *Stay, A Blessing for Ascension Day*, by Pr. Jan Richardson. This poem emphasizes the invitation to stay and points to the promised outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, the event that we will celebrate next week.

Stay

A Blessing for Ascension Day by Jan Richardson

I know how your mind
rushes ahead
trying to fathom
what could follow this.
What will you do,
where will you go,
how will you live?

You will want
to outrun the grief.
You will want
to keep turning toward
the horizon,
watching for what was lost
to come back,
to return to you
and never leave again.

For now
hear me when I say
all you need to do
is to still yourself

is to turn toward one another
is to stay.

Wait
and see what comes
to fill
the gaping hole
in your chest.

Wait with your hands open
to receive what could never come
except to what is empty
and hollow.

You cannot know it now,
cannot even imagine
what lies ahead,
but I tell you
the day is coming
when breath will
fill your lungs
as it never has before
and with your own ears
you will hear words
coming to you new
and startling.

You will dream dreams
and you will see the world
ablaze with blessing.

Wait for it.
Still yourself.
Stay.

Let's take a few moments now to pause, to wait, to stay.

Amen.