

April 7, 2024

Second Sunday of Easter

“Waiting on the Promised Spirit”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Acts 1:1-14

After Jesus’ resurrection, the disciples were waiting for the Holy Spirit. They were waiting, as it says, “to receive *power* when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.” Power is a strong word. It’s a reminder that the Spirit is an animating force; it urges us on and gives us strength, specifically to be witnesses to Jesus Christ. We are praying that the Spirit will empower us, through this Playroom, to witness to the goodness of all types of families; to the image of God reflected in children; and to the good news that Christ invites all of us into a new way of life, filled with service and love and sharing.

This opportunity did not come about because we tried to find it. And it looked nothing at all like I expected God’s answer to be. I truly believe this fell in our laps because we were waiting with hope, with anticipation that God was calling us to be present in our community in a new way. As Willimon says, “Our waiting implies that the things which need doing in the world are beyond our ability to accomplish solely by our own effort, our programs and crusades. Some other empowerment is needed, therefore the church waits and prays.”³ To wait is to take a posture of humility. To wait is to say, “we don’t know yet, but we trust that God does.” To wait is to acknowledge that God surely is and has been at work, empowering us to be disciples. To wait is to acknowledge that we depend and rely on the Spirit to guide our everyday lives.

And so in that spirit of reliance on God, we’ll close with a prayer:

“Thank you, God, that whenever we are not sure of what we should do, we know you are with us and if we listen, really listen—deep down inside our hearts—we will hear your answer. Help us not to panic when you seem to be silent; not to run when you are nowhere in sight. Lord, help us to wait, knowing you will lead us in kindness and love—you always do, you always do. Amen.”⁴

The story we read today is from the book of the Bible whose whole name is Acts of the Apostles. That makes sense—it’s about the early church, the first apostles, people who were out sharing good news, teaching people about Jesus and his resurrection. But it’s not so much about all the apostles. It’s really Peter, and then Paul, who take center stage, as well as others who were not part of the twelve, including some important women.

So it’s been suggested that a better name for this book is actually *Acts of the Holy Spirit*. The Holy Spirit is the main character, or perhaps the driving force, behind everything that happened. And what happened was the good news of Jesus Christ spread, breaking across all kinds of ethnic, religious, economic, and geographic boundaries. Our focus during this season of Easter is on the Holy Spirit, the presence of the living Christ. We’ll think about how the Spirit was moving in the early church and how the Spirit is moving among us now.

Today we enter into the story about 40 days after Jesus’ resurrection and the empty tomb. The resurrected Jesus appeared to his friends during those 40 days and gave them a promise and some instructions. The promise was that they would receive the gift and power of Jesus’ own self, the Holy Spirit. The instructions were that they had to wait for that Spirit. They had to wait for God’s timing. And then, they couldn’t ask any more questions, anyway, because the risen Jesus ascended to heaven, right in front of them. His ascension reminds us that Christ is the one who rules and reigns. When things fall apart, he is in charge. And here on earth, we have the Spirit to guide us.

But in the story, the Spirit was still a promise yet to come. For now, the instruction was to wait. Be patient. Hang tight. Hold on. Those are no one’s favorite words. The commentary I read by preacher Will Willimon this week was written in 1988. He wrote, “Waiting, an onerous burden for us computerized and technically impatient moderns who live in an age of

1 William H. Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox, 1988), 21.

2 Andrew Root and Blair D. Bertrand, *When Church Stops Working: A Future for Your Congregation beyond More Money, Programs, and Innovation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2023), 50.

3 William H. Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox, 1988), 21.

4 *Spill the Beans: Worship and Learning Resources for All Ages*, Issue 18, 2016.

instant everything, is one of the tough tasks of the church.”¹ If that was true thirty-six years ago, imagine how much worse we are at waiting in 2024, when, if the web page takes longer than 1.4 seconds to load, we get frustrated and assume something is broken. We watch television when we want it, on demand. Groceries and restaurant food can be dropped on our doorstep almost instantly. We do not like to wait for anything. And that’s the little stuff. The struggle of waiting for much more important things is hard to even quantify—the results of the scan, the lines on the pregnancy test, the college acceptance letter, the death we know is coming, and still cannot bear. Waiting is not something we ever want to be told to do.

This past fall, I introduced our Session, our leadership, to a concept of *holy waiting*. Trust me, they did not like it either. I’ve shared a bit with you from this pulpit before about the idea of *waiting*, written down by a couple of theologians and scholars, Andrew Root and Blair Bertrand. In response to all the church gurus who tell us to try new programs, start a praise band, get an electronic sign, do more, more, more—that is what will make your church great again, Root and Bertrand say no. Their advice is to wait. Stop trying to reinvent the wheel; wait on God to act. These authors argue that the best things that people of faith have ever done have come not because we try harder, but because we wait for God to act, to lead the way. They write, “A waiting church is waiting for God, waiting for the Spirit to move, and waiting to connect with God.”² Waiting is another way of saying that we get out of the way, so that God can do what God is already up to. Waiting is trusting that the seeds we have planted will grow, even if that growth is sometimes surprising or frustratingly slow.

We still pushed back on the idea, as you might expect. Waiting doesn’t feel realistic. It doesn’t really make sense, when there is so much need in the world. This passage in Acts even says, “why are standing looking up to heaven? There’s work to do, so go get to it.” And yet, we also reminded ourselves of what scripture says: that the wisdom of the cross, and of the resurrection, appears to be foolish, when you look at it by the standards of economics or efficiency. It’s only when we look with the eyes of faith, that we can begin to make sense of it. That’s true with this idea of waiting on God, for sure.

About the same time the Session talked over these ideas, they also set some goals for this current program year. One was about increasing our spiritual growth and another was about our hands-on mission and service activities. Those two, we knew how to work on them. Our third goal was to share more about our congregation in our wider community; to be more present to neighbors and people we don’t know yet. On that goal, we

didn’t know what to do exactly. And no one stepped forward to lead the way. I even shared this goal a few months ago in worship and a newsletter, hoping that a congregation member might feel a pull to help us set up a booth at a local street festival, or something similar.

Nothing happened. So we decided to wait. I’d like to say that decision was guided by our discussion, and grounded in faith and prayer. But it was more a decision of necessity—no solutions had popped up. So we waited. We kept the goal out in front of us. We hoped that an answer would be given, or a direction would emerge, if we’d been on the right track to begin with. We continued on in ministry.

And then a couple of weeks ago, we got an email from folks at a church in Berkley that has just sold its property to the school system there. Cana Lutheran Church will be moving out of its building and they were looking to relocate their signature ministry, which is called the Backyard Playroom. The email asked me if our church would be interested in having the Backyard Playroom move into our building. The Backyard Playroom is a free play space for children aged five and under, where parents or caregivers can bring kids three mornings a week. The Playroom has an adorable play structure, lots of toys made from natural materials, and space for kids and their grown-ups to get out of the house, connect, and build friendships. They average 30 to 40 people who use and visit the space each day they’re open. I visited it at Cana, and asked the moms there if they would be willing to drive across Woodward to our church if it moved here. One mother had driven from West Bloomfield and she said, “I’d drive anywhere to keep coming to the Playroom.”

Long story short, the leaders on our Session said ‘yes.’ They have taken a leap of faith. Although many of the details are still being worked out, sharing our church with the community in this way is an opportunity we could not miss. And one we hope you will want to join in on—let me know if you can help with installation, setting up the room, or financial donations! Our leaders had been waiting for the power of the Spirit to show us the way, and the Spirit finally did reveal the path ahead. In a few weeks, the Backyard Playroom will move to two classrooms in the back of our Joyful Journeys Sunday school hallway. We’ll onboard a new part-time colleague to staff the space. And then we’ll start welcoming young children and families to play here, three days a week. I’ve personally committed to showing up in the space, getting to know people, and, when we can, inviting them to see what else God is doing here in this church. To see if this community might be a good fit for their family. To see if they might like to connect with the Spirit in a new way, here.