

Acts 1:6-14

1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11

John 17:1-11

Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36

A sermon preached by the Rev. Susan Pinkerton, St. John's Episcopal Church,  
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### “The Great Pause”

Today, we are a congregation in diaspora. Since mid-March we have been exiled from our place of worship. Our building remains closed and the pews are empty. Yet, unlike the ancient Israelites who were forced into exile into ancient Babylon after their temple was destroyed, we make this sacrifice of our own choosing, closing our place of worship out of love and concern for each other and for those most vulnerable to this awful virus. Even though we yearn and long for the day when we will once again gather together to worship, we continue to wait patiently and prayerfully.

It is ironic that even though we are physically separated from each other as a community of faith we are forging a deeper, more substantive spiritual connection to each other and to God. I have had the good fortune of being part of a number of thoughtful conversations with several of our parishioners during this time and it is abundantly clear that despite being surrounded by suffering, brokenness and horrendous loss caused by this pandemic, we remain a people of hope and resilience. We are buoyed up by our faith in the one true living God that will remain with us to guide us through this most trying time.

We only need look at the men and women who formed the very first congregation; the courageous followers of Jesus we read about in today's passage from the book of Acts. They have been with the Resurrected Christ for forty days since that first Easter morning when Mary Magdalene saw and mistook Jesus for the gardener outside the empty tomb. Jesus has made a number of appearances during their time together preparing his followers to become leaders in this new age to come, equipping them to do what Jesus commissioned them for on that first Easter Sunday, “to go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19-20). Jesus is calling his followers into action and he has promised them that they will receive power by the Holy Spirit to enable them to move throughout all of Judea, beyond the Roman Empire and to ends of the earth to bring about the next chapter of the story of God's salvation of the world.<sup>1</sup>

This past Thursday was the Day of Ascension, a lesser known holy day on our liturgical calendar that commemorates when the Resurrected Christ ascended into heaven. Unfortunately, it is a day that goes by without much notice in most Episcopal churches even though it provides the essential connecting point between Easter and the birth of the church. The story of Jesus'

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Skinner, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=884](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=884), last accessed on May 23, 2020.

ascension into heaven presents us with a very bizarre, almost humorous image of Jesus rising upward as his disciples look up in amazement at his sandaled feet dangling from a cloud. It has been problematic for believers and theologians for generations when this event is taken literally. Instead, a number of modern scholars understand the story of Jesus ascending to heaven as a metaphor, symbolizing Jesus' elevation from his physical, temporal, earthly existence into the presence of our Creator, into a realm that is beyond our human comprehension and veiled in mystery.<sup>2</sup>

Right before Jesus' ascension the disciples ask, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). This question has been burning in their hearts since the very beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, this messianic hope of restoration and new life. Yet, Jesus tells them to not to concern themselves about when things will unfold. This is God's domain, not theirs. It is not about Jesus abandoning this world leaving us to fend for ourselves. Instead, the ascension marks the universalization of Christ not just for the kingdom of Israel but for you and me; the entire cosmos for all time. This is the fulfilment of Jesus' promise that he will be with us always, until the end of the age (Mark 28:20). In the meantime they are to return to Jerusalem together where they pray and wait for the coming of the Spirit.

Next Sunday we will celebrate the Day of Pentecost, the birth of the church when the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus' followers as they crowd together in the upper room. Right now, we are sandwiched in between these two monumental events, Jesus' ascension and the Holy Spirit's inauguration of the church.<sup>3</sup> Like the disciples, we find ourselves in a liminal space, a time of anxious waiting and worrisome anticipation, not sure of what is to come.

Waiting is not easy for us humans, especially in this digital age where we have instant access to about everything imaginable by way of our Smartphone or laptop. As Will Willimon, preacher and theologian, writes, "Our waiting implies that the things that need doing are beyond our ability to accomplish solely by our own effort...Some other empowerment is needed, therefore the church waits and prays."<sup>4</sup> And, so it for us today. In our homes and apartments we wait and we pray. We find ourselves living in such a unique time. This awful virus has brought the world to a screeching halt, forcing us to face our mortality and our frailty. Our readings from Scripture reveal God's prophetic imagination on how life ought to be lived. They are stark reminders that we are not in control. This time of uncertainty urges us to ask the big questions of life – the questions that call for us to be in serious engagement with the wisdom of creation and the words of Scripture to get some understanding, some insight, of what God may be revealing to us about ourselves and about the world.<sup>5</sup>

One theologian, Richard Rohr, has likened this time as the "Great Pause." This in-between time can be seen as an unexpected blessing where we are beckoned to enter a portal, a gateway, to think and rethink how to break with our past where we leave the "old normal" behind and begin to

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<sup>2</sup> Mikeal C. Parsons, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2067](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2067), last accessed on May 23, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Sean A. White, *Feasting on the Word*, (Louisville: Knoxville Press, 2020), 520.

<sup>4</sup> Randle R. (Rick) Mixon, *Feasting on the Word*, (Louisville: Knoxville Press, 2020), 520.

<sup>5</sup> Will Willimon, interview during *Festival of Homiletics*, May 18, 2020.

envision how to live into this post-pandemic world. In the midst of all this we give ourselves time to mourn, to name all that we have lost and given up. Today's front page of the New York Times reads, *U.S. Deaths Near 100,000, an Incalculable Loss*. There is no story line. No photographs. Instead, there is a list of the names of 1,0000 people who have succumbed to this virus. Each name represents one of the 100,000 people we have lost in this country. Indeed, this is time of lament but we don't stay there. We also look forward and use this unusual gift of time to discern the limitless possibilities of restoration and new life, for our planet and for ourselves.

I imagine many of you have seen the incredible satellite photos of parts of China that reveal the drastic reduction in air pollution due to a sharp drop in transportation and manufacturing. There have been sightings of small fish swimming in the canals of Venice where the water is noticeably cleaner because there is less traffic on the waterways. I have spoken to folks who have rediscovered and renewed old relationships. Some hope to maintain the close contact with their families they have enjoyed these last few months, determined not to fall back into the old grind of working long hours away from home. Connecting with many of you during our online services and events I have been reminded over and over what a precious gift our community is, something never to be taken for granted.

No matter our individual situation we are each faced with the choice of how we live into the future; do we travel lightly into new territory or do we return to the past? What do we take on and what do we give up? What will our restored lives look like? None of us has the answers to these big questions. As Jesus told his disciples on the day of his ascension only God holds these answers. So during this "great pause" we travel through this portal together and we pray and we wait. And, if we find we cannot pray, we take comfort in knowing that the "Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 18:26). We can do this because we are people of hope not despair.

Amen.