



“The Waiting is the Hardest Part”

May 16, 2021

Luke 24:44-49

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One of the most beloved passages of scripture is found in Isaiah 40:31 -
*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.*

Other passages in the Psalms and the Prophets similarly urge us to “wait on the LORD.” Of course, *wait on the LORD* in this context means something more like “attend to God” or “hope in God.” But sometimes, even that kind of waiting requires that we *literally* wait.

Waiting isn’t exactly what we humans do best. At least, it’s not what I do best. I want things to happen on my timeline, not on their own. I’m not alone. Society increasingly caters to our collective impatience, from online shopping that promises next day delivery of everything from toothpaste to home electronics to building supplies, to qualifying for a 30-year mortgage for hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt with one click from a cell phone. A recent commercial for national used car retailer CarMax promises an instant, online offer to buy your used car, paired with images of people who don’t like waiting: a little girl longing to grab a piece of birthday cake, a man burning his mouth on food just extracted from a microwave, an expectant mother doing everything she can to bring on labor, a woman skipping to the back of a book ironically titled *The Time Jumper*. It’s a very clever commercial.

But waiting is precisely what Jesus commanded the disciples to do before he ascended into heaven. They had endured much: following Jesus throughout Galilee and Judea, standing by his side as he taught and healed, seeing a dream collapse as he was arrested and tried and condemned, watching him suffer and die, hearing of a miraculous rising, then being startled by his sudden appearance. Waiting was not the next step they had in mind. In fact, when he appeared to them in Jerusalem, Jesus spoke first of action. He revealed the mysteries of God’s Word to them. He directed them to proclaim a message of repentance and forgiveness of sins to all the world. And he commissioned them to witness to all they had seen and experienced.

And then he told them to wait.

What must it have been like for the disciples? The roller coaster of emotions: dismay to despair to shock to elation. What do you think Jesus said when he “opened their minds to understand the scriptures?” If it was anything like what he had shared earlier on the Road to Emmaus, it had a huge impact. Cleopas and his companion had described that their hearts were “on fire” when he explained the scriptures to them. That must have been one heck of a sermon.

The disciples were fed, fueled, and fired up. They had been built up to the calling of their lives – to witness for Jesus to all the world. And then they were told to...*wait*. That’s like running to the edge of the pool and then sitting down, like walking down the aisle and stopping at the last pew, like getting all dressed up just to stay home. But Jesus instructed them to wait *until* they had been “clothed with power from on high.” Eager though they might be, they weren’t ready; not until they received power from the Holy Spirit.

We know a little about waiting, don’t we? We’ve been waiting for a long time...

- ...to return to work or school as we knew it before
- ...to hug our families, to be with our friends
- ...to go to a restaurant or a concert or a game
- ...to worship in our church building
- ...to get married
- ...to start a family
- ...to memorialize our loved ones

...to live again.

I feel that longing, too. I'm tired of waiting. I'm tired of making plans and adapting them over and over again. I'm tired of preaching to a camera, of offering pastoral care over a phone, of holding sensitive meetings over Zoom, of doing everything I can to be a minister of the Gospel knowing that none of it is the way I want it or as good as it should be. I'm tired of checking the daily numbers of new infections, of waiting for a vaccine to be developed and then waiting for more people to get it. The last thing I want to do now is wait.

This week, the CDC gave the green flag to vaccinated people going unmasked, paving the way for life to begin returning to normal. It's an exciting time. I can't wait! But if we rush headlong back into the world without reflecting on who we are and what all this means, we'll have squandered an opportunity we'll never have again. Think of everything we've learned:

- how much we miss being together
- how much we need each other and the relationships that shape our identity
- how to make it on our own (working from home, being relatively self-sufficient, where to find toilet paper and other essentials when they're not easily available, going to meetings and church in our pajamas or workout clothes)
- how to bake bread or do home repairs or make crafts that occupy our energy
- how to meet over Zoom and to entertain ourselves with streaming television

We could, using all the new knowledge and skills we've acquired, become even more self-reliant. But emerging from the pandemic more isolated and individualistic would be a tragedy even greater than the loss of life COVID-19 has left in its wake. We're not made to live in *isolation*, but in *community*. And though we might adapt and even find some momentary happiness or contentment on our own along the way, we cannot truly be fulfilled without one another and the relationships that make us who we are.

This time of waiting has presented an intriguing challenge for our denomination. You may be aware that the United Methodist Church was preparing for a major conference in 2020, just before the pandemic, a conference that happens only once every four years. For several years leading up to it, major differences over theology, views on same-sex relationships, and the authority of bishops had caused deep divisions within the denomination. Factions within the church were vying for control, each proposing reorganizational plans that would redraw the map of United Methodism and change the nature of our relationships with one another. As we approached the date for that conference, it seemed inevitable that one of the proposals would receive the votes needed to create a permanent split in the church.

Now, a year and a day removed from its scheduled adjournment, the General Conference still has not met. It will not meet this year, either. And plans for the conference to meet in 2022 are tenuous at best, given the global makeup of the church and the yet unsolved challenges of international travel. That delay has been the cause of much consternation and dismay. Though I also wonder if it might be a gift, saving us from a rash decision with consequences we hadn't fully considered and aren't entirely prepared to accept. It's hard to predict what the future will hold; even now the jockeying for influence has begun to ramp back up. But at least one major proposal appears to be in retreat, thanks to the time we've had to contemplate its impact on the church that has brought so many of us to faith in Jesus Christ and a knowledge of his saving grace.

Given the disappointments that come from the church and other spheres of influence in our lives, it's tempting to strike out on our own, to leave behind not just a faith community or one denomination in favor of another, but to walk away from church altogether. Why do we need it, anyway? I can read the Bible on my own. I can pray on my own. I can learn to be a caring and loving and Christlike person on my own, can't I?

In his book, *A Time to Build*, political scientist Yuval Levin traces the roots of a growing social crisis in our nation. We recognize that we suffer a lack of connectedness, evidenced by "loneliness and isolation, mistrust and suspicion, alienation and polarization."¹ Levin identifies this lack of connectedness not simply in an ethereal or general sense of connection between individuals, but as a direct result of the breakdown of *institutions* and their impact on society.

¹ Yuval Levin. *A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream*. New York: Basic Books (2020), 16.

He defines institutions broadly as “durable forms of our common life,”² including things like universities, hospitals, government, corporations, and civic associations, though he also includes more basic, foundational forms like families. Institutions are, by nature, formative, meaning they shape perceptions, interactions, and character.

But our institutions are failing. They are failing us and we are failing them. Those failures can sometimes be attributable to acts of corruption and betrayals of trust. But Levin identifies another, more pervasive source of loss of public confidence. He identifies what he calls an institutional movement from *mold* to *platform*. Our institutions are devolving because of our obsession with individualism and because we no longer see them as centers of formation. Institutions, as a result, have become less *formative* and more *performative*. That is to say, the function of institutions as molds which form identity, values, and character has been subverted in favor of platforms for establishing and launching individual brand, influence, and visibility.

Now, Levin is a political scientist, so it makes sense that he uses as an example the U.S. Congress. In theory, Congress is supposed to be a benevolent institution whose role is to craft legislation to improve the lives of its citizens. While it has always struggled to lived up to that charge, members of Congress seem increasingly to move further away from that role. Being a Senator or a Representative has become a platform for personal advancement and becoming a social influencer. He offers specific examples on both sides of the aisle, though I’m sure you can think of some too without my naming of individuals here.

This attention-grabbing behavior has far-reaching implications, not just for the role of institutions in shaping character and values, but also in terms of public trust. If our institutions are now simply platforms for individual expression and attention, how reliable can they be as sources of truth and guidance? How can we share and shape community values when it’s every man and woman for themselves?

The church, unfortunately, isn’t immune to this institutional trend. Do we see the church more like a mold or a platform? Hear me out. I think our intentions are good. We genuinely want to encounter the Word of God and to grow in Christian discipleship. But there are powerful forces at work in us and around us. It’s not easy to be aware of our subconscious, of things like the posture and attitudes with which we approach worship or participation in other aspects of faith life. *Do we look to the church to shape our understandings and values? Or do we try to make the church into a place that supports and reflects our convictions?*

We’ve wrestled with some hard topics together over the past year: increased awareness of racial inequity and injustice, a struggle to be both inclusive and transformational, an incredibly contentious election cycle and an assault on democracy, a global pandemic, and others. We have examined current events together from a faith perspective, even with the added challenge of not being able to gather face-to-face. If those efforts are to prove fruitful, they must grow out of a clear understanding of the role of the church. We *need* the church – to mold us and shape us not into a society of like-minded individuals but into committed Christian disciples that together serve as the body of Christ in the world. We wait upon God – we attend to God and listen for God’s guidance – by studying the scriptures, thinking theologically, reflecting together, and praying with and for one another. The church is not a *platform* for elevating personal or even collective status, but a *formative community* that helps us grow in Christian discipleship. That isn’t to say churches or denominations always get it right. It certainly isn’t to say that your pastor has all the answers. But if we begin from a clear understanding of who we are and what we are called to do, God can shift our thinking away from merely influencing one another’s opinions and attitudes toward the more essential role of reflecting Christ in all that we do. That’s our true calling: to be the Body of Christ for the world.

When the disciples encountered the Risen Christ, they were changed. They were no longer distraught, dismayed, and disordered – they had a renewed calling and purpose. Each had memories and experiences that shaped their perception of Jesus and what his living presence meant for the world. Each, no doubt, had their own ideas of how to witness for Christ through their own perspective and gifts. They each had a lot to offer. They could have gone out on their own that day, but Jesus had bigger plans. There was more to come.

What was yet to come was the Holy Spirit, the sustaining presence of God that came to them on Day of Pentecost. We often refer to that day as the “birthday of the church,” because the power of the Spirit that descended that day turned the disciples from ordinary fishermen and day laborers into bold and courageous ambassadors for Christ, from a loose confederation of individuals into the forerunners of the church that continues in us. The Holy Spirit

² *ibid*, 19.

was not only a source of power, but also the unifying force that would birth a movement of Christ followers that would change the course of human history.

In the coming weeks, we'll emerge from the isolation that has been so much a part of our lives for the past fourteen months. This moment in time has changed us, and it will shape our lives for years to come. Will our reemergence be a time for unfettered individual liberty and self-expression, or will it be a time for rediscovering the relationships that shape our character and our values? Will the church be merely one more step toward normal life, one more place to gather with people who share a common interest, or will we redouble our efforts to be the Body of Christ to a world in need of hope and redemption?

Those who wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength. And so we wait for the Holy Spirit. Whether that will mean literal waiting we cannot say. But I pray that, together, we will look for the movement of the Spirit and renew our hope in Christ. May it be so. Amen.