

Waiting on the Spirit.

Sermon preached May 13, 2018 at St. Peter's Cathedral in Helena, Montana

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Good morning.

Since last Thursday, when we celebrated the Feast of the Ascension, we have been remembering those great 10 days of waiting between the Ascension and Pentecost. In Jesus' last conversation with his disciples before his departure on the Mount of Olives, he instructed them all to return to Jerusalem to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit, which he promised would be poured out on the church.

These 10 days were a time of waiting, of preparation and of attending to a number of important matters. We know from the account in Acts just before the passage we heard this morning, that the people in the upper room were the 11 disciples together with certain women including Mary, the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

We also know that a major decision needed to be made about choosing someone to replace Judas. Our lesson from Acts tells us that the church numbered some 120 people and the entire body participated in the decision. Peter is the leader and spokesman of the group and we learn that there was a basic criterion for being on the short list of candidates! The criterion was that he must be among those who had accompanied the disciples during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among them, beginning with the baptism of John until Jesus' ascension. Two persons were proposed, Joseph called Barsabbas who was also known as Justus and Matthias. They all prayed asking God to reveal who should be chosen and the lot fell on Matthias.

The choosing of Matthias was one of the most important matters to be decided over these 10 days of being gathered together, while waiting on the Holy Spirit. Little more is recorded about what the church did except that they constantly devoted themselves to prayer.

I have always found this ten-day period of the Church's life to be an opportunity for some faithful speculation. Ten days is a long time to be together, but for sure, there were essential matters to discuss.

This group had been with Jesus from the time of his baptism. Surely there was much to remember and many eyewitness accounts to recall. After all, this would have been the group whose collective memory was to produce the four gospels. This would have been the group to remember Jesus' parables, his sermons and his healings.

It would also have been the group who were eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection. Certainly, there must have been a very conscious, communal effort to remember exactly what happened in order to protect the accuracy of the eyewitness accounts. One of the points some scholars make about the Easter stories and why they are so trustworthy, is that they are not embellished. In most other instances a famous story gets embellished over time. But every account of Jesus' resurrection appearances has a simplicity, accompanied by shock and surprise. The eyewitnesses protected the accuracy of the narratives without any allowance for embellishment. We can be pretty sure that a good deal of time was taken in those days to remember every story and every word of Jesus.

In addition to the choosing of Matthias, devoting themselves to prayer and reflecting on each detail of Jesus' life, these first disciples practiced the spiritual discipline of waiting. Waiting is not an easy discipline, especially for us in our current culture. We don't seem to want to wait for anything. We wait in line in order to buy fast food! We can wait in traffic, we can wait to see if we got into college, we can wait for a plane to arrive, we can wait for a check in the mail. We can wait for a child or a spouse to come home from war. We are not accustomed to waiting, but waiting is a very important spiritual discipline.

How appropriate it is to hear about our church's ten-day period of waiting on Mothers' Day. I suspect that being pregnant is as intense a lesson in waiting as any human experience. The length of waiting is determined by factors beyond our control. That can be a source of anxiety, but it can also be a source of blessing. I suspect that a mother quickly learns that her life is no longer her own. There is also time to think, to ponder like Mary did during her pregnancy. Waiting in pregnancy is a time to ponder what sort of child this person will become? Waiting is also a time to prepare. There is work to be done and needs to be anticipated.

The discipline of waiting takes practice and requires active attention. I remember a choir master teaching me about the discipline of 'active silence'. Anyone who sings in a choir has to learn when their section is singing and when it is waiting to sing. Maintaining an active silence is required or you can go to sleep and not come in on time.

I can remember times when I went on retreat and saw monks being so quiet it drove me crazy! I would ask myself, "what are they doing, being so silent? It has taken me much of my life to learn an answer to that question. The answer to the question, what are they doing, is in the question. They are waiting, they are not doing. Who said that you always have to DO SOMETHING! What obsessive compulsive person wrote the commandment that you always have to DO SOMETHING.

When I find that person, I am going to give him a piece of my mind!

Waiting is essential to a life of prayer. Waiting is about being attentive. It is about being available to God. It is about listening to God and appreciating what the Holy Spirit is doing.

I love to tell the story from a course we were on at St. George's College in the wilderness of Judea. One of the pilgrims was a Spanish nun. We were staying in a Bedouin camp with a beautiful view of the Judean mountains. We were asked to maintain an extended period of silence. There was a sitting area where we could just look at the mountains, the desert sand and the expansive blue sky. After several hours of silence, this nun commented how much God allowed the scenery to change without any of us having to do anything! The sun moved, the shapes of the mountains altered with the shadows, new colors were illuminated and all with none of us having to do anything. Waiting in silence brings its own gifts of observation and appreciation. Being attentive to the beauty of God's creation is essential to a life of prayer.

A prayer of waiting takes practice. We have so many things that rattle around in our minds distracting us and keeping us from being available to God. One last story comes to mind. I was attending a commencement at Nashotah House, the seminary from which your previous dean, Heidi Kinner, graduated. The speaker was my favorite theologian, NT Wright, who gave the commencement address. After he finished, there was an opportunity for anyone in the assembly to ask

questions. One of the students asked a marvelous question. He said to Bishop Wright, “you are a world- renowned scholar who has written massive books on every aspect of the New Testament. My question is, ‘How do you pray?’”

Bishop Wright looked a bit surprised, as if he had never been asked such a question before. He took a moment to gather his thoughts and then he said this. “Sometimes, before I can pray, I have to be quiet for the better part of half an hour, just so I can begin to hear God.” What a great answer, and one we all need to hear. Waiting on God is a difficult discipline. It is also an essential one. It needs to be our first prayer before we say any others.

Today is the Sunday between Ascension and Pentecost. It is a period when the church waited on the Spirit which Jesus promised would come. It was also a time when the church had important work to do such as the choosing of Matthias and sharing in community all that they had seen and heard. As we ponder this time of waiting, may we practice this prayer as we say our other prayers, so that we may be attentive to the promptings and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Amen

The Very Rev. Graham Smith, Interim Dean