

Betwixt and Between
Acts 1:1-11
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Preaching in the Age of COVID-19

May the God who creates us...

Good Morning!

We are betwixt and between, are we not?

In that middle time, that liminal time, the time between time, anxious for this all to be over, not sure when it will end and unclear as to exactly what we'll be doing then. We are in the "mean time."

So too are the apostles, Jesus has been with them after his resurrection for some forty days. A month and then some when I can only imagine it feeling as if the world has stopped, all small things cease to matter, their friend, their hope, their one who embodies all of their longings is with them, in the flesh, now no longer dead. What could matter at all when you have visceral, tangible proof that death doesn't win?

This has been their lives for forty days, but as the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles writes, now Jesus tells them to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the Holy Spirit. Jesus goes on to say, "When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth," (Acts 1:8). Then he ascends, rises bodily up to heaven. Ten days later, on feast of Pentecost, the apostles still in that infamous upper room are baptized with the Holy Spirit. Their lives are changed, again. Their lives are changed again and forever.

But now, before Pentecost, before being baptized with the Spirit, right now what are they to do? As they stand gazing up, watching him disappear, as they crane their necks to the sky.

They must be wrestling with awe and despair. Awe that he has lifted, awe that He has just ascended before them, awe that they have seen this, that they are the ones who are present to witness and see. And despair. Despair that he has gone. Despair that he has left them. Despair that once again, it's not Israel's time and they are left with vague descriptions and directions for waiting and then witnessing. Despair that they have no idea really what is to come. What does being baptized with the Holy Spirit even mean? Despair at so very many unknowns and that he has left them.

They are-- on that day, o so long ago, much where we find ourselves now: Betwixt and between. Is the pandemic over? Is the end in sight? Vaccines matter, but what of the variants? Can we gather together, is it safe, is it not? Can we ever get back to normal?

Is it this day, or maybe the next? Anxiously peering around the corner, hoping that clear directions are soon coming. Wishing, one day by, after another, hoping for all to go by quickly, so we can return to what we had, relish again all that we miss.

It's a weird time, this moment in COVIDtide, I feel like we find ourselves in a similar place to the apostles as they watched Jesus go and waited for the Holy Spirit to come. Mourning all we've lost, stuck here with some vague promises, waiting for what follows next.

Can we learn from the apostles? What did they do in that time between time, that mean time?

They stayed in Jerusalem, in community, with one another; they didn't go it on their own, they stayed together. They Stayed together and they prayed, the remaining 11 apostles and some of the women, Jesus's mom, probably Mary Magdalene, maybe a few others who'd gone to the tomb. They all prayed, devoutly, regularly and they began to plan for the future.

The group of believers, now connected with the original 12, has expanded --120 people are now regularly with them, all hovering around in and out of that upper room. From this gathered group they call forth a new leader to replace Judas who had betrayed Jesus. Gathering in community, praying devoutly and planning for the future. Simple though it seems might this be a blue print and a plan for all of us, as individuals and as members of communities, can this be a plan for us and for our congregations in these next few months?

Tired as we may be of the curtailed lives we've been leading, think how annoying hanging at with everyone in that upper room must have been for the women and the apostles, for all of them. No doubt Peter snores and James and John wouldn't know how to clean a dish if it jumped into their hands and I suspect that now that it has been confirmed that Mary is the Mother of God, I wouldn't be surprised if she got a bit bossy every now and again. But still they stay, all together.

We too, though Zoom and Livestream are not how any of us longs to have church, we too may take the time to show up, to connect, to be in relation with one another on those Sunday mornings. It's not what we envisioned our lives would be two years ago, and even last year, I don't think many of us thought we'd still be doing this. But, here we are, and with some new people joining us, come to see what it means to be people of faith in the midst of a pandemic. They were in the upper room and we're in the zoom room.

They prayed. The women and the apostles prayed, with great devotion. I don't know about you, but sometimes, it feels as if my prayers are flat and my devotions are dull. I find myself thinking that FB might be at least as interesting as saying Morning Prayer. And it's then, when I slide from my routines and relinquish my spiritual grounding

that the Zoom calls seem never to end and the tedium of my house, and my amputated social life cascade around me in a shower of shredded dreams and acute frustrations. Its then that everything seems flat, two-dimensional.

But, when I sit and meditate and read morning prayer, when I walk and pray, ride and remember, and paddle and pause to take in all that the world is and all that God has given, then I remember what it means to be loved, what it means to be blessed, what it means to be whole.

They were devastated, and they waited and they prayed. What about us? What about you and me—devastated, sad, filled with grief and still what if we prayed?

They waited and prayed and they planned. They gathered and discussed their future, who is God calling, even in this between time, who was God calling to leadership in their emerging community?

Friends, going forward, to the new next that we do not yet know what or when it will be, who do we need to help lead? Who are our partners? Our collaborators? Our future dreamers and creators? How might we plan and who might we invite into leadership? It is an odd, unsettled time, a porous time, the time to invite new people, new voices, new perspectives to the forefront. They did then, perhaps we can now?

In this between time, this mean time, this liminal place, we can stagnate, complain and despair, or we can gather, pray and prepare.

May we all have the heart to do so, in God's Holy Name.