

Comings and Goings
By Jason Huff
Isaiah 63:7-16, 1 Timothy 6:11-21, Acts 1:1-14

Today's final Scripture reading is Acts 1:1-14. Listen now to God's Word. "In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers."

There are four words every child knows. They come out whenever you're a half hour into a cross-country journey. Doesn't matter how old they are, doesn't matter if they've got the world's best book to read or are playing a GameBoy, they all know the phrase. In fact, you can say it with me. Ready? "Are we there yet?" I am convinced that God somehow implanted those words into every little brain so that we as adults would know what it was like for *our* parents when we asked *them*, "Are we there yet?" We all get annoyed when they say it, but I can only figure out one reason why – it's because deep in the back of our heads, *we're* saying it too.

Impatience affects all of us. Right around the corner at Gratiot and 23 Mile, there's an old Steak and Shake. I think there's a reason that they closed, and that's because it takes forever to get your order. They tore up a perfectly good McDonalds down on Groesbeck and built a brand new one with two car lanes so that you could get through the line faster. We rush everything. But rushing stuff isn't always good. If you want a good shake from Steak and Shake, you have to wait for it. I was reading the other day that many modern vegetables have about a third the nutrients they used to have because of the way they're grown – produced to make as much as possible in as short a time as possible. But I've got to eat three times as many of the vegetables I don't even like to get the benefits from them! Waiting sometimes works.

Today's passage is full of details about Jesus' last days on earth and the disciples' first days without Him. There are incredible events and amazing promises. But the only command Jesus gives in the whole passage is "wait." Everything else ties to that instruction. I think we can learn a lot by learning why the disciples needed to wait and how they went about waiting.

Here's the first thing we learn from the passage: *when God asks us to wait, there's a good reason for it.* Jesus tells the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for a few days for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. John's baptism with water was a cleansing from sin to get right with God, but the baptism of the Holy Spirit is something else entirely. Jesus explains the Holy Spirit will come with power, and it's by the power of the Holy Spirit that they will be able to witness to the whole world about Jesus' salvation.

The Holy Spirit is an incredible gift. It's through the Holy Spirit that we can even know Jesus. Last week, we read how Jesus was raised from the dead bodily. Today, we read how He bodily ascends until the disciples can no longer see Him. Even now, Jesus is still in His resurrected body at the right hand of God the Father. When Jesus was among us, He was in a single place at a time. He limited Himself in becoming human. But the Holy Spirit doesn't have those limitations. The Holy Spirit is the reason believers can say Jesus lives in our hearts. It is through the Holy Spirit that we have that real and vital connection to Him.

But the Holy Spirit is also our counselor, the one who reminds the disciples (and us) about the teachings of Jesus. The Holy Spirit guides us in what to say to others about Jesus. The Spirit works in the hearts of people long before we even meet them, preparing them to hear and accept the truth of the gospel. The Spirit also transforms us. Before the Spirit comes, the disciples are still locked up in a little room. They have no power on their own. But when the Holy Spirit comes, they are changed and take the good news everywhere! And finally, the Holy Spirit is the seal on our hearts, showing that we belong to the Father.

The Holy Spirit is fantastic! Yet the disciples had to wait for Him to come to them. It seems strange they had to wait ten days to receive the Holy Spirit after Jesus ascended into heaven. Since Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit first came to believers, the Holy Spirit comes to us and seals us at baptism...so why did the disciples have to wait? What we do know is this: God often prepares His people by making them wait for good gifts. God promised Abraham a son, and then Abraham waits 25 years before Isaac is born. The people of Israel wait for 40 years to enter the promise land. The nation of Israel goes into exile for 70 years in Babylon before God restored them. The promise made to David of an eternal heir to rule his throne is fulfilled nearly 1000 years later in Christ.

Why does God make us wait, especially when there's suffering involved? In some cases, we just have to say, "I don't know." God is bigger than us and knows the whole story. But God has spoken to us through His Holy Word about waiting. James 5:7 compares our patience to the patience of a farmer who waits for the rains and harvests only when the crop is just right. In the same way, God has us wait because time brings the maturity we need. Romans 5:3 tells us that we should "rejoice in our sufferings because suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, and character produces hope." When we wait through the trials, the character God builds in us is able to not only withstand the suffering but grows new life in us.

I know for me personally, waiting produces humility. Perhaps the disciples were told to wait so they would know that the incredible response to the Gospel they see in next week's passage comes from the Holy Spirit's work and not from them. Often things don't "go our way" because we need to learn humbleness. We need to realize that God ultimately calls the shots. As theologian J. I. Packer puts it, "were it not for the sovereign grace of God, evangelism would be the most futile and useless enterprise that the world has ever seen, and there would be no more complete waste of time under the sun than to preach the Christian gospel." We need to realize that no plan of ours succeeds without the LORD's intervention and grace.

It's easy to think that *we* can make something happen. When the church is doing well, new people are coming, unbelievers are coming to know Jesus as Savior and Lord, and the offering baskets are full, it's easy to think that we did it. On the other hand, when there are empty seats and we have to stretch pennies, we stress out because we think we're the ones to blame. But we don't control these things. All we can control is our faithful response. A church can have the outward signs of success and be a failure because it's unfaithful. A church might at first glance look blighted but inside show the fruits of faithfulness. We must respond in faithfulness, but ultimately, God is the one who provides the harvest, no matter what it turns out to be. Waiting can make us realize that. Sometimes that time in the wilderness when things aren't looking perfect is precisely what we need to prepare us for the times ahead, so that when we do have the visible signs of success, we will give the glory to God and not to ourselves.

I believe that we have been in a time of waiting at Church of the Covenant. Over the past few years, we've seen the results of faithfulness. We've studied Jesus' life together and seen hearts grow receptive to what God is doing and has already done. Through sacrificial giving, we raised a roof! God has been healing wounds from the past. If we stay faithful to His calling and His leadership, I believe we will move forward in incredible ways. But just like the disciples, we need to be humble and obedient as we move from waiting into action.

The second thing we can see in the passage is this: *we must discern between times when we should wait and times when we should act*. This happens twice in this passage. The first time, Jesus promises the Holy Spirit, and in reply, they ask, "So does this mean Israel is finally going to be restored?" They are back to thinking in worldly terms. They want to know if they should wait to begin until the physical nation of Israel makes a comeback. Jesus says, "Don't worry about that. Your job is to be my witnesses, not to wait around for an earthly Kingdom." And ironically, when the Holy Spirit does come, their act of witnessing spreads God's Kingdom far and wide. Waiting for the restoration of Israel would have completely stopped them from doing their job, which was exactly what broadened the eternal Kingdom

Later, Jesus ascends into the sky, and they all just kinda stand there, even when He's out of sight. Now that's a fair reaction; can you imagine being with Jesus and all of a sudden, whoop, He's up in the air above the clouds? I'd be staring too! But then these angels come up to them and say, "Why are you staring? He'll come back eventually." The disciples were waiting for something – maybe another sign, maybe for Jesus to come back – even though Jesus had told them that He would be going away eventually. The angels are comforting and convicting the disciples at the same time. They're saying, "Don't worry – He'll be back again," and they're also saying, "In the meantime, go do what Jesus told you to do – go back to Jerusalem and wait."

Sometimes, it seems silly that people would sit around waiting for Jesus to come back, but it was a real problem for the early church. Paul has to write his second letter to the church in Thessalonica because they were misled into thinking that Jesus had already come back and they've missed it. Some believers there had gone so far as to stop doing anything because they were convinced that Jesus was coming back right away. Paul's letter tells them, "Don't worry about that – continue working and living for Christ until He comes again."

In our own lives, we pull back from the clear instructions God has given us because we are fearful. We don't know what lies in store for us if we take a mission trip or build a friendship with someone who needs to know Christ. Sometimes it seems like too much work. For me personally, I know there's the fear of rejection, even the lie that I'm responsible if somebody doesn't believe what I'm teaching. Lots of things hold us back, but there's one thing that drives us forward: obedience. God has made His plans for us clear, and those plans are for us to live out our faith in our everyday lives and to witness to His grace as He shows us opportunities.

Discernment enters the picture when we start making decisions how to follow Jesus faithfully. Not everybody we meet is ready to hear the gospel. A lot of people have never heard of God except as a curse word. They need to see compassion in Jesus' name so they know it's real before they can hear the truth about sin and our responsibility for it and Jesus' sacrifice to free us from it. Jesus took three years with the disciples to prepare them. Sometimes we have to wait in order to be faithful. But there are still things we can do in the meantime. And when God says go, we've got to go! We've got to be ready when Jesus calls.

Perhaps the biggest problem with knowing when to wait and when to move is not the actual waiting or moving but "how do we do it?" How do we do what we are called to do? And for that matter, what is our calling? You're not alone in wondering that. In the next few weeks, we're going to discuss the role of the church and the role of the believer in simple ways we can all remember. Beginning in September, we're going to do a series called "Irresistible Evangelism," and we're going to learn how to reach out to our neighbors and friends and community together in ways that make sense. Then we're going to start on a journey through the Bible called "The Story." You'll hear more about that in coming weeks, but we as a church are going to understand the sweep of Scripture and see how the whole Bible comes together around God's revelation of Himself to us. We will learn what we are called to do as the people of God and how to do it. When the time is right, we will have the tools to do the work God created us from the very beginning to do in His name.

The final lesson in the passage is this: *prayer is our best response in times of discernment when we are told to wait.* The disciples go back to Jerusalem. Jesus has said that the Holy Spirit will come in a few days, but Jesus' timetables are notoriously hard to decipher. They don't know how long they have to wait. So they pray. It's the one constant. Whether the Holy Spirit's coming tomorrow or next week or next year, they know they have to be communicating with God. How will they know when God speaks if they aren't listening?

It's the same for us. How do we discern when to move forward with our plans and when to put them on hold? When has that friend's heart become open to hearing about Jesus Christ? What does the Holy Spirit want to do in our midst? The only way we can know is through prayer. In prayer, God leads us and directs us. He makes us aware of His grace and His power. And it's through prayer that He changes us. It's there that we most realize our need for Him. And it's in prayer that we realize that when God asks us to be patient, He is building our capacity to be patient with others.

I think that prayer may be the hardest thing for the modern Christian to do on a daily basis. Even as a pastor, it's hard for me to go through a list and pray, "Make this person better and this person better and this person safe and that person safe." It's dull and it's even impersonal; often, I'm praying to get done praying, not because I feel like I'm really connecting with God. But maybe it's because I've got the viewpoint wrong; maybe we all do.

I thought this week about the fact that my boys never call me on the telephone to tell me a list of things they want me to do for them and their friends. But when I get home, there're often fights about who gets to sit on my lap. They both want to cuddle and have quality time with Dad. Sometimes I'll hear about their day; other times, they want to wrestle. Sometimes, I even get asked about my day. That up-close-and-personal time makes all the difference.

When Jesus was in His most desperate hour, He called the Father "abba," which in Aramaic means "daddy." *He got this.* The harder things are, the more we need God to be our "daddy." If we see prayer as just a list of things that we want God to do for us – or even for others – we aren't actually communicating with God. Communication is two-way. We're listening in prayer for what God wants as well as sharing with Him our own desires. Does God want us to get to know that neighbor across the street or to start up a Bible study on our block? Does He want to assure us of His love for us and convince us of His presence? Those things can happen when we think less of prayer as a "list" and more as a personal conversation.

Maybe it's best to think of prayer as time on Daddy's lap...time to pour out our hearts and share with Him our days and our thoughts and all those things and those people who've been on our mind, and time to listen to Him and just find out who He is and how He is shaping us into His perfect sons and daughters. In that personal time you take with Him, I encourage you to think about eternal things, not just earthly things. We can get trapped in asking God just about our day-to-day needs, which are important. But what role would God have you play in His eternal plan? Who is it that needs eternal life in Jesus Christ that you can bring before the Father in prayer? Open your heart and mind up to God, and you will find Him leading you as you wait on Him and take time waiting to hear from Him.

Jesus ascended into heaven not only to take His rightful place by the Father's side, but to send the Holy Spirit to us as our guide and seal and promise. He told His disciples to wait, and while they waited in the midst of God's comings and goings, they prayed. I think that God wants to move in the hearts of His people here at Church of the Covenant. We can hear the same lessons that the disciples learned...be patient...wait on the LORD...pray to Him...and when the time is right, He will be among us in a way that will surprise and delight us all as the Holy Spirit moves among us in power.