Good Shepherd Episcopal Church
The Episcopal Church
The Sunday after the Ascension
May 24, 2009

There are a lot of people who do not know how to live without excitement, without stimulation. Whether it comes from pleasure or from crisis, they thrive on activity, on doing things, on solving problems, on adrenalin.

The time that exists between one crisis and another or between one activity and another is regarded by them as dead time, as time that is lost, time that is unimportant, time that doesn't count.

Even people who are not adrenalin junkies sometimes find it difficult to face a period of time in which not much is happening, a period of time in which they must wait for a promise to be fulfilled, or for an event that they are looking forward to to take place.

The Ascension reading from the Book of Acts tells us how the disciples found themselves in this kind of situation, how they found themselves facing a period in which they would simply have to wait for Christ's promise to them to be fulfilled.

After the resurrection Jesus had visited with his disciples on several occasions. He taught them, he encouraged them, he commissioned them to do a job. Then, on the day of his ascension into heaven, when they were anxiously asking him when his kingdom would be established, about when the next installment of the divine plan would take place, he tells them that it is not for them to know the times or periods that were established by God, so they should go back to Jerusalem and wait,

- wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit,
- wait for the power they would need to witness to him there, and in Judea and all of Samaria, and ultimately, in all the world.

For many, waiting is a dreaded time. Just ask any child waiting for this school year to come to an end in a week or so. But it doesn't have to be like this.

Living between times, living between occasions in which all of our minds and hearts and energy have been absorbed in events of significance can, in fact, be quite wonderful.

It can be for us, a pause that refreshes, a time in which we gain strength, a time in which we quietly grow and are prepared for that which will come next.

Being a child of World War Two, I enjoy watching the history channel when the focus is on military history. For instance I learned that when the machine gun was first invented a problem developed with it. It seems that if it was fired continuously for a period of time that the barrel would heat up and cause the gun to jam, even upon occasion, to explode.

At the beginning, two simple solutions were invented to overcome this problem. You could either change the barrels, or you could stop firing for awhile.

God knows that we, too, need periods of rest, periods of waiting, periods in which we can be changed, refreshed, renewed…or without that time out, we, like those first machine guns, may jam up or explode.

God provides to us periods of time which are in-between times, periods in which we can be strengthened and prepared for what is to come next.

The prophet Isaiah says that those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength, they will mount up on wings like eagles, they will run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

From this perspective, waiting is a positive thing. The time between the making of a promise and its fulfillment is a time which is, or can be, very beneficial to us.

But living in the times between, in those times between one phase of our lives and the next, between leaving 3600 and returning to warship there, between one job and another, between the time when the first child has married and the last has yet to enter school, between the period when we have lost one dear friend and have yet to find another, these times can be difficult for us if we do not know how to wait. The Word of God gives us direction for such waiting.

So how should we live in the times between?

First: we need to remember the times in between are meant to be active times, not passive times; times in which we are meant to focus on at that which is at hand, rather than at that which is yet to come.

When Jesus ascended into heaven before the eyes of his disciples to take his place as Lord at the right hand of God the father, an angel visited them and asked them: "Men of Israel, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same manner as you saw him go into heaven."

In the times between, our eyes are meant to be fixed on the present moment that God has given us and what it is God wants us to do with it and in it.

We are called to live now in the way God intended us to do, rather than to live in the future.

The disciples responded to the words of that angel who asked them why they were just looking up toward heaven by returning to Jerusalem as they had been instructed and there they waited for Jesus' promise to be fulfilled.

And while they waited they devoted themselves to prayer.

Which leads to the second important part of learning how to live in the times between: in those times we are called to live as Christ has shown us how to live, we are to live in obedience and in connection with Him and the Father.

The poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote:

> Let us, then, be up and doing,
> With a heart for any fate;
> Still achieving, still pursuing,
> Learn to labor and to wait.

When the disciples returned to Jerusalem they stayed together, joining themselves with the rest of those who believed in Jesus, with Mary and his brothers and many others, and they tried to live as one as Christ had prayed that they would be.

They stayed together and they prayed together, and in so doing, they prepared themselves for the job Jesus had told them that they would do when the Holy Spirit would come upon them as he had promised it would.

In times between, people often take the opportunity to prepare themselves for what is supposed to happen next. Between jobs they may go back to school, between relationships they may enter into counseling, between seasons of great endeavor they may just appreciate the down time and actually relax and rest so that they have the strength to go on.

There are many ways to prepare for what we believe is coming next, but in the end, for those who are seeking to do God's will and to see God's promises come true in their midst, prayer is of central importance.

As Jesus told the disciples, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you ‐ and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria ‐ and to the ends of the world"

Prayer and devotion to the mind and will of God is of central importance because it is this which prepares us for the gift of the Holy Spirit which allows us to be open to the power His bestows.

We all know about gimmicks, quick ways to improve your body or mind: 99 practical solutions to improve your marriage or to create a better business or build a bigger church. But the real solution lies not in these kinds of gimmicks but in having God's Spirit work through us.

It is the Holy Spirit which enabled and guided the ministry of the disciples, and it is the Holy Spirit which enables and guides our own ministry as his followers, our own witness to Christ, in fact, it is the Spirit, and only the Spirit, which allows us to be truly fruitful with our lives.

As the word says, it is the spirit which gives life... Our task in the times between, whether it is a time between what is obviously one work of God and another, or simply a time between one event in our daily lives and another, is to make ourselves ready to be used of the Spirit; that Spirit which may come, as it does so often, sooner than we think.

How do we live in the times between?

First ‐ we need to remember in the times between to focus on what is happening now, not on what is going to happen later.

Second ‐ we need to follow the commands of God and keep connected with him through devoted prayer so that we are strengthened and prepared.

And Third ‐ and the last I want to mention today, in the times between, we need to trust and have confidence that what has been promised to us by God will come to pass.

‐ whether that promise is of a spiritual gift,

‐ or a promise of comfort and of a new life

‐ or a promise to bless us and use us in some particular way in his service.

We need the confidence, not because our confidence will change the outcome for what God promises to us will come to pass. No, we need this confidence because when

we have it we open ourselves up to the peace of God and the other blessings that God has for us right now, now in the time between His promises and the time of their fulfillment.

To return to Isaiah's words ‐ those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength, they will mount up on wings like eagles, they will run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

We notice in this promise the words ‐ will and shall ‐ and the total lack of modifiers in front of them. It is not, they who wait for Lord might renew their strength, it is not, maybe they will walk and not faint. It is, they will renew their strength and they shall walk and not faint..

Unconditional promises attached to a simple statement of condition, the condition which says ‐ They who wait for the Lord ‐ or as it says in the King James version ‐ they who wait upon the Lord.

In the times between, the times of waiting, trust in the Lord to come through.

We are to remember his resurrection and his ascension into heaven to be at the right hand of God. We are to remember what he has done for us in the past and wait for the next act, the next promise to come true with a firm hope.

So let us trust in the Lord, not in other things and live today, this day, as he asks us to, let us stay connected to him and to his word by prayer and meditation with our brothers and sisters, and live in accordance with His life giving Word at all times.

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