

Are We There Yet? Acts 1:6-14 Ascension Sunday

I remember going on a trip to Montana with my family in a very cramped Toyota Corolla in the early 1980's. My twin sister and I shared the back seat together and would often get into the usual tiffs that boredom would bring on. This was before any technologies to entertain us were available – no phone, tablet, no way to watch a movie, just reading, looking out the window, playing a few games and sleeping were possible. And yet, somehow we survived what felt like an interminable time sitting there. And yes, I remember saying the following words that may have exasperated my parents: “Are we there yet?”

Anyone who has ever taken a long car trip with a child has heard these words, sometimes within moments of getting in the car. One of the funniest memes of this is the famous cartoon character Bart Simpson, from the longest running cartoon TV show, the Simpsons, who says “Are we there yet, Are we there yet, Are we there yet” over and over again until his Dad Homer yells his classic, “DOH”!

But, it's not just children who want to know how long a trip is going to take. Personally, before I had even heard the words Covid 19, it used to be that my least favorite thing in the world was that whole preparatory stuff of getting in the shuttle, getting to the airport, checking in and finally boarding your plane, only to sit there some more while you get to your destination. The destination is the goal, isn't it?

Or, is it? Using this analogy of waiting to get to a destination is something that is constantly on my mind and on my heart in these difficult days. This feeling of wanting to get there, of knowing what we have before us; this feeling of getting back to some normal pattern of life even as it's clear we may only be at the tip of the iceberg on understanding this dangerous virus, looking around, one might wonder if we really have decided we should be there before we actually are.

This desire to control, something, anything of life, the “Are we there yet” impatience really is a part of the human condition. It's in my bones, too and I miss my people so dearly. This indeed is our common story and

it was the story of those first believers of the Gospel, too. All of us know what this between one thing and another is like and so did those first believers of the Gospel know it, too? Knowing if you will still have a job and waiting to begin a new one, whether finishing the school year is actually feeling like finishing something, being in a summer mode without knowing what that summer can be, waiting to see what college accepts you, or if the bank loan will go through, or if the diagnosis will be a good one, or if the marathon will be run the full 26.3 miles. The first believers knew what this was like, too. Covid 19 did not need to be their quandary. They had others.

This feeling of waiting for the outcome or the result of something, this impatient, dubious, nebulous, time before or at the end of something... It's that in-between time that puts us all in that place of asking in anxiety or frustration, "Are we there yet? I just want to know if I am almost there!"

So, we just might see why it is that the disciples ask Jesus before he is taken up into the clouds and out of their sight, "Are we there yet?" Well, that really is a paraphrase of "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel," but essentially they are asking: Are we there? Are we finally at the time when you will redeem all your creation? Are we there yet, when you will bring us all to your kingdom and give us new life? Jesus, is this finally the time?

And Jesus' answer is the answer that a child often gets in the car on a long trip: "We will get there when we get there and no sooner than that. Oh, and by the way, only God knows when that will be. But, in the meantime, I will give you my Holy Spirit to help guide you to your next step, even if that next step is waiting in patience for the next step after that." Again, a paraphrase, but the meaning is there.

Now, I can relate to the disciples here. I really can. Three years before, Jesus tells them to follow him, they drop everything to do so, and then for those three years they witness our Lord teaching, healing, dying, raising, and then appearing to them off and on for forty days after the Resurrection. I can completely understand that it would be disappointing that that is not the end, and that, indeed, it's not even the destination! And,

furthermore, Jesus is now leaving them alone, at least physically alone! Their only instruction is to wait for the Holy Spirit to come so that they can be witnesses to the Good News. How long do they wait? They have no idea how long!

And, then they look up...and they stay looking up. As Jesus goes up into the clouds, the disciples look up even after they can't see him anymore. They aren't ready. They don't know what to do. They long to be there, up in heaven with Jesus. They want to be there already. Until an angel has to actually tell them: "Stop looking up. You have more work to do and the Holy Spirit will tell you what it is in Jerusalem." So, they go...only to wait for a while longer. Their only response can be to resort to prayer to help them.

So I think it is for us. Like the disciples, we are living caught in an in-between, nebulous time, too. And, our desire to get to the goal, we first need to ask what that goal is and what it's for. And, once we have determined together what that is, is that goal from God or not. Here are a few things that I think we can take from this lesson of Acts and apply it to our own lives for this day:

First, God will always help us discern.

As the disciples continued to look up to the sky, even when Jesus was out of view, they had to be snapped out of it. Angels had to come and wake them up, so that they may pay attention. Have you ever been in a car accident? I have. The first thing that happens is that, if you lucky to not be horribly hurt, you first wonder what just happened. You were driving along one minute and then BAM, out of the blue, something happened you were not ready for. You are dazed, confused, hurting, and responding.

When that happens, it's very hard to make a plan for the future. The first thing you can do is respond to what has happened. And, how the disciples did that was to return to Jerusalem and...wait. They went back and waited for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And, what did they do during that time of waiting? They praised God continuously but that was about all. They had just had a jolt, a new thing, a crazy turn in their lives,

one that would change them forever. They needed time to discern what to do next. And, they were instructed to do that.

Secondly, the waiting, the in-between times in life are important, not just for the church, but for each of us personally in our faith journeys. These in between times are actually valuable. I believe that each of us is experiencing one of those valuable times. We ought not hurry to something we think we should have back until we know what God wants us to do.

I know how very hard it is to not know what to do next. In this culture of instant self-gratification, where you can see your latest email in seconds and post instant memories on Instagram, we are becoming a people unused to having to wait for anything to happen. But, let me tell you, the disciples had to wait for that promised Holy Spirit. And, their response was to join together in community and spend time in prayer.

Whenever a time in your life is like that, when you don't know what your next step in life ought to be, whether to buy a home, begin a new job, start retirement, or decide on a college, go out in public with an underlying condition, it might be hard for you to consider that the in-between time is just where God is working on you, so that you can be molded by Christ's desires for you. And, furthermore, this time may be a time for you to grieve the losses that have happened because of this virus. That also is valuable. Lament is as important as joy according to scripture. This may be a time for you to honor your lament, so that joy may come in the morning.

Let's not mistake this lesson in Acts as a lesson only about how to witness to the Gospel and what you should be doing in and for the church. God wants to lead you in everything you do in life. The decisions you make for your family, for yourself, and for your neighbor actually are important to God, too, for the here and now. And, those "decision making" times in life, where to go next or where not to go next, are times when God is often really active. We may already want to be at the goal in our desire to know what is ahead of us, but God may want us to stay in the in-between for a while instead.

Lastly, Jesus has not left us alone.

It may seem that in this reading from Acts that Jesus floats away from the disciples never to be seen again. It really does look like he has left them alone. But, they are not alone. As we hear in the Gospel reading for today, Jesus will be with and in them as Spirit. He will never leave them. He has poured out his Spirit on them and us, so that we all may know that God is present with us along the way.

Furthermore, we have signs of Christ's presence here...in water, word, confessions, hopefully soon in bread and wine, and the neighbor around us, that make up the Body of Christ in the world, so that we may receive the strength we need to stop looking up all the time and instead look around to God's hopes and intentions for us here and now.

Therefore, if Christ is truly present and has not left us alone like he promised, where is he in your life made manifest?
In others? In our church?
In creation or in your recreation? In your children or godchildren, parent or spouse? In your own lonely discernment, loss, or need?
Where is Christ's Holy Spirit present in your life?

For life is full of 'in-between's', not only just now. It can be difficult to trust given that we often just want to skip to the end. But, life isn't always about our goals so much as it is about our journeys.

So, how is your journey going? Are you finding yourself too often looking up?

Because Christ is here

...in you

...in your life

...and has promised never to leave you from the start, to the end...

...and the times in-between. Amen.