



Ascension Day Year B

Wait. Pray.

[RCL]: Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47 or Psalm 93; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

Today's first reading and gospel form an unusual pair. They both come from the two-volume work attributed to Luke the Evangelist. One is from the end of the first volume, the book we call the Gospel according to Luke. The other is from the start of the second volume, the book we call the Acts of the Apostles.

Both readings deal with events around the ascension of Jesus. In each passage, Jesus promises his disciples that they will receive power from on high. And in each passage, he tells them that they must stay in the city, they must wait, for the realization of this promise.

Their period of waiting is memorialized in the church year. For here we are, on Ascension Day, which commemorates the return of Jesus to his Father. Nine days must pass until the Day of Pentecost comes, when we commemorate that gift of power from on high.

This nine-day period is sometimes called Ascension Season. It is the conclusion of the Great Fifty Days of Easter. Thus, it appears as a season within a season.

For the first disciples, it was a time of remaining in Jerusalem. A time to wait, and a time to pray. It reminds us, who are later disciples of Jesus, of the role of prayer and waiting in our lives.

Prayer and waiting sound pretty safe until we remember that our society has little patience with those who decide to wait and pray. Ours is an action-oriented culture, action-oriented to a fault, so that many of us pass much of our time struggling with stress and weariness.

Our culture is no friend to prayer, either, except possibly prayer that reinforces the status quo. But all authentic prayer is a response to God, and God has been known to be a change agent.

Moreover, prayer acknowledges our dependence on God, and our culture is, at heart, uncomfortable with an acknowledgment of dependence. Our culture is independence-oriented, independence-oriented to a fault, so that many of us live and die in considerable isolation from one another.

In the face of all this, then, there is something subversive about coming to church on Ascension Day because this feast is not just a goodbye to Jesus as he makes his way home; it is an invitation to countercultural activities such as waiting and prayer.

On this day, our attention might well focus on the triumphant Christ as he, in ways past our understanding, ascends through all the heavens. Our attention might well rivet on how he ascends in his humanity, and that therefore we who are human, we who are his body, ascend together with him.

But today I would like us to consider instead those waiting, praying disciples gathered in Jerusalem, anticipating power from on high. What they do is countercultural by our standards. They wait. They pray.

But there is still more about them that makes our dominant culture uncomfortable. They wait, they pray, not simply out of obedience. They wait, they pray, because they desire. They desire that promised power from on high and all that it makes possible. Their desire is good and holy.

Ours is a culture that accepts desire only to trivialize it. Our TV commercials sing hymns to hamburgers, they celebrate the glories of dish detergent. Our politicians--many of them--incite our fears and jealousies, rather than help us desire greater justice. Poets and artists, writers and film-makers are often not widely known among us unless they bend our desires in directions violent or sentimental in the manner of much popular culture. Yes, we accept desire only to debase it, to turn its focus from what is finally desirable and authentically glorious toward the trivial and the tragic, things that have no future.

One of the most memorable sculptures of the last several centuries depicts the Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila caught in a moment of ecstasy. This work by Bernini is a very human presentation, yet the presence of the divine cannot be denied. The sculpture presents the Holy One as manifest in this woman's life, together with her desire for God.

Art like this seems a world away from our society's cheapening of desire. And so, as a society, we lack the ability to understand what, for Teresa, is the big deal. Because we have trivialized passion, we have weakened our own ability to recognize a desire for that which is the greatest of all, namely God.

The days and seasons of the church calendar represent attitudes that remain important to us all the year round. This is especially true now, during this Ascension Season. Christ returns home to the Father, and the gathered disciples wait and pray and desire. Their desire is for God, for the complete coming of the kingdom, for the power from on high that will make their lives bright torches.

Can we make their particular brand of waiting and prayer and especially desire hallmarks of our lives? I believe this is possible.

Set free from cheapened forms of desire, from violence and from sentimentality, we can desire the One who is the most desirable. This will renew our various desires so that they will no longer be frustrated or misdirected or frail. Instead, these desires of ours will become worthy of the God who pierces the hearts of his saints with desire for himself because his heart is pierced with desire for us.

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