

Ready, Set, Wait
February 4, 2007
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I am very pleased to be here with you at The Church of the Epiphany in downtown Washington! I had a wonderful week at the Cathedral College on the grounds of the National Cathedral. Part of what made it a great week was the presence and company of your Rector, Randolph Charles. You may recall the old chestnut of a song, "I've Grown Accustomed to Your Face." In Randolph's case, my sentiment might be "I've Grown Accustomed to Your Laugh." One evening the group watched a movie together, "Little Miss Sunshine." I found Randolph's wonderful laughter nearly as entertaining as the movie itself.

Our text this morning comes from the Book of Acts, the first chapter. It is a transitional chapter. As it begins the Risen Lord Jesus is still on the scene, abiding among his disciples. In fact, we are told that he spent forty days with the disciples. It was a time of intensive preparation for their new roles, their new job as apostles, and for the new chapter in the salvation story that was soon to begin. Moreover, and as we saw in the conclusion of Luke, where Jesus opened the Scriptures to his disciples and broke bread with them, so here Jesus "presented himself alive to them with many convincing proofs and taught them of the Kingdom." And he fellowshiped with them, and ate with them.

At the end of the forty days the time had come for him to depart, to ascend to the Father. As his final act he gave his charge to his disciples. "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth."

Preparation complete, charge given, Jesus ascended. It has a feeling of, "Ready, set, go." That's what you expect. But that's not what happens. As it turns out, it's not, "Ready, Set, Go," it is "Ready, Set, Wait." Twice in the final words of Jesus in Luke and Acts he says, "Wait." As the Gospel of Luke ends Jesus says, "But stay in the city, wait until you are clothed with power from on high." And again now in Acts 1, "And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father . . ."

Ready, set, wait. What's up with that? The instruction to wait is peculiar to Luke and Acts.

When we look at the parallel passage in Matthew, for instance, there's nothing about waiting. Jesus meets up with the disciples upon the mountain and says, "Go!" "Go ye into all the world and make disciples of all nations." With Matthew it is "Ready, Set, Go." With Acts, "Ready, Set, Wait."

Truth is, my background, training and world-view all prepared me to be a Matthew kind of guy. Most of the church crowd that I hang out with, the United Church of Christ, are Matthew kind of folks. We're pretty comfortable with "Ready, Set, Go." Not so comfortable with "Ready, Set, Wait." Jesus says, "No, sit tight, just stay here in the city, don't go anywhere. Wait." "But Jesus, we're ready, we want to go, to get on with it. We want to do things. There's a world of need out there."

A friend tells the story of busing to the south to participate in the Civil Rights movement decades ago. Arriving the seminarians were taken to a black Baptist church to what seemed to my friend interminable worship services. Singing, preaching, praying. More singing, preaching, praying. He and others began to grow restless. They wanted to

get on with it, to get out there, to do it, to go. Their hosts said, "Just take it easy, just wait, pray. When you get out there, when they open the fire hoses and set the dogs on you, you're going need to know who you and whose you are."

Sometimes when I've preached on this text, I've shot right past the waiting part to the part where Jesus ascends and two strangers turn to the slack-jawed disciples and say, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand there looking up into heaven?" My next move is to explain that what they mean by that is, "Don't just stand there do something." But that's not really what the text says. It may be closer to the mark to say that what the text says is, "Don't just do something, stand there."

Some years ago the church I served in Seattle celebrated its 125th anniversary. For the occasion we had a big party one night with speeches and entertainment. Someone wrote a song for the occasion. Its title was, "The Busy Congregationalist." Verses recounted our nearly incessant meetings, projects, programs and ventures. It was hysterically funny. To be honest, it was also a little painful. Without saying so in quite so many words it pointed to the way we took ourselves and our doing a little too seriously and didn't take God's doing seriously enough.

Not long after that anniversary celebration our congregation entered into a partnership with a large predominately African-American church in the city. We were excited. Two large churches, each with a proud history, great things would come of this we felt certain. We were in the "Ready, Set, Go" mode.

When leaders of our congregation met with leaders of our new partner church we said, "let's make a list of possible activities, projects and priorities." What are our goals, our plans? We were eager to get busy, to get going. Our counterparts from Mt. Zion Church approached the venture in a very different way. They suggested that we begin by a season of prayer and study of the Scriptures together. "We need," they said, "to wait on the Lord, to wait on the Spirit." Only later did we realize they had invited us to the same discipline to which Jesus had set the disciples in the days before Pentecost; prayer, study of the Scriptures, waiting on the Spirit.

It was a telling difference in approach, and one from which we learned. In the years that followed, other shifts took place among us. We began, for instance, to pay attention to our own heritage, to practices that had once been central among Congregationalists but which had been all but lost.

One such practice was "discernment." We discovered that our forebears, the Pilgrims and Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, had been known as "The People of the Meeting." This was not, however, because they had a constant round of business meetings to attend or because they were busy Congregationalists in our way. It was because of their belief that it was in the gathered community, when two or three were gathered in Christ's name, there they were most likely to discern God's will, God's way. Our forebear's were marked by the belief that no one person, no Pope, Bishop or King, had all the equipment necessary to know God's will or way by themselves. Rather, the gathered community of believers, the gathering of those whose hearts and minds had been shaped by Scripture and formed by prayer, was the most promising setting for meeting God, for discerning God's will and the mind of Christ.

We had nearly lost this practice of discernment. We had traded it for something else, which if not exactly pottage, did not touch the longing of our hearts. Instead of the meeting to discern the mind of Christ or the guiding of the Spirit, we had grown used to

meeting to discern the will of the majority. In place of prayerful listening we had substituted making motions, lobbying for our side, and Robert's Rules of Parliamentary Procedure.

Slowly, haltingly, we learned the practice of discernment. We learned, as we met and considered an action or decision, to pray together after each person spoke, "May the Holy Spirit speak through us," followed by a brief silence before another speaker. It slowed us down, it reminded us that it was not the will of the majority we sought by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We learned that all were welcome to speak at our meetings not because of some liberal notion of tolerance or because everyone has a right to their own opinion. It was different; it was because you never know through whom the Holy Spirit might speak. The nature of our congregational meetings changed radically, and they did so not because we had come up with some really neat new idea, but because we had re-discovered a very old idea, a practice of our ancestors and our forebears in the church.

We learned, in short, to wait upon the Spirit. In doing so, we entered nearly unwittingly into a period of recovery, recovery from our addiction to busyness, recovery from our relentless activism. We learned again the wisdom of waiting on the Lord, waiting for the wind of the Spirit to blow among us.

I share this with you because you stand, it seems, on the edge of a season, a year, a time of discernment. Your congregation has vital ministries, you have grown in membership. Survival is no longer the issue. And now, your Rector has put before you his dreams for Epiphany. He has shared his dream of growth in membership, growth in financial support for mission and ministry, growth with a capital fund drive and renovation of this wonderful sacred space in the heart of the city. But quite properly he has followed this sharing of his dream by the right questions, "Is this God's dream for Epiphany?" "What is God calling Epiphany to be and to do?" Is God calling Epiphany to grow in the several ways your Rector has named, or in others?

I sense that this shows a certain restraint on the part of your Rector, a certain deep wisdom. I suspect that there was a time when he too was a "Ready, Set, Go" type of guy. But now he has invited you to a time of discernment, to "Ready, Set, Wait." Wait on the Lord, wait on the Spirit.

Since those years that I began with my congregation to rediscover the practice of discernment, I have continued to learn. I have led several congregations in processes, seasons of discernment. One part of discernment that has been most challenging and terribly important is what some call "Shedding." If you were to think of discernment as beginning with something like planting a seeds--questions, matters about which we seek the Lord's will--there is a sense in which the seed must die, must cease to exist as a seed in order for something new to be born, to grow. Jesus said as much. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

So too as part of discernment, there is "Shedding." Shedding, dying to are our own agendas, our own fixed ideas, our preoccupations and or axes to grind. In a deep process of discernment, we are asked to name our agendas and fixed ideas to let them die that we have room in our hearts and minds for what God wants, what God might reveal. I have found that, when we name our own agendas, our own fixed ideas, our own ego driven plans, and offer them up, something happens. There is dying, a letting go, but from such a death amazing, surprising new life does emerge.

Jesus ascended to the Father, and his disciples returned to Jerusalem, returned to Jerusalem to wait, to wait upon the Spirit. Their waiting was not an idle, passive waiting. It was an expectant waiting. They did not disperse each to his or her own home, going back to their own routines. No, they stayed together. Part of this waiting was solidarity with one another in the community. And together they prayed, together they studied the Scriptures. They waited on the Lord, called upon the Lord, turned to the Lord.

In doing so they were learning and saying something important, something that God may wish to teach us in this time. Our waiting implies that the things that need doing in the world are beyond our ability to accomplish solely by our own effort, our program, our crusades. Some other empowerment is needed; therefore, the church waits and prays.

For about three years now I have been doing a new kind of ministry. I no longer serve one congregation as Pastor. Today I speak and teach, consult and coach, write and lead. I work with many congregations and denominations, as well as leaders, clergy and lay. It's been a great experience and I've been very blessed in the work. But sometime last year I began to wonder, to be a little anxious. Am I doing the right thing? Is this important work? Should I return to congregational ministry? Should I look at other leadership positions? Many questions and some of them ego driven. Maybe it wasn't so much, "Is this important work?" as "Am I important?" I was anxious. I felt that I needed to reach a decision.

Then around New Year's I noticed an article on New Year's Resolutions. I'd never been big on resolutions. But a part of the article caught my attention. Someone described as a work/life balance coach suggested that people give the year, the new year, a theme. Interesting. "Start," she said, "retrospectively. Give a theme to the year now ended." I pondered a bit, prayed some, and arrived at a theme for 2006. It was "Harvest," because I had published four books in 2006. I will never publish four books again in a single year I'm quite sure. But it did give me grounds for calling 2006 "Harvest." Then I turned to 2007. In "Ready, Set, Go" mode I might have chosen something like "Decision" for the theme. But the theme I chose for 2007, or perhaps was given, was a different one: "Advent." It is for me a year of being open, of waiting on the Lord, of listening, of watching and waiting, prayerfully.

The amazing thing was that nearly as soon as I gave this name or theme, "Advent," to this year, I felt a sense of peace. I didn't need to rush to decision. I didn't need to have an answer if one wasn't there yet. I needed to wait, expectantly. I needed to let God be God. Arriving at "Advent" as a theme for the year allowed me to let go and let God.

So perhaps you and I are both in a year of Advent? A year of expectant waiting, of listening and watching, of seeking the mind of Christ, of waiting on the Spirit.

For you there is an additional powerful note in the words of Jesus. "But stay in the city, wait until you are clothed with power from on high."

Ready,

Set,

Wait!

It's been a blessing to be with you! Thank you!