

The Impatience of Faith

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Acts 1:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

I am not a patient man. I struggle with patience, as I am sure many of you do. I suppose patience would not be a virtue if it were easy. Of course, we live in a culture that rewards impatience. We are the culture that brought the world overnight shipping, ubiquitous broadband internet service, minute rice, pizza delivery, microwave ovens, instant tea, email, and the fax machine. We want the whole world, and we want it now.

That sounds familiar. it reminds me of something, perhaps a movie I once saw... [here the scene from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* where Veruca Salt sings "I Want the Whole World, and I Want it Now" is shown.]

I want the whole world, and I want it now. The gospel according to Veruca Salt. The thing is, we often do want what we want now, even if it isn't the whole world. If you are like me, this impatience can even extend to your faith. I want God's blessings, or God's rescue, or God's answer, or God's intervention, or God's results, and I want them *now*.

In this text, just before Christ's ascension, the disciples manage to squeeze in one more question. It is a common question, albeit one that is a little impatient, one Christians have asked throughout the ages: "When?" Is now the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel. Through it all; teaching, miracles, death, and resurrection, the disciples have still managed to cling to that old hope of a political messiah whose kingdom is of this world. Yet Jesus does not offer anything in the way of correction to their question, he merely deflects it: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority."

Psalms 6, 13, 35, 74, 79, 80, 82, 89, 90, 94, and 119 all include the question to God "How long?" *How long, O God, how long?* How much longer must I endure? How much longer must I wait? How much longer will my enemies prevail?

I find impatience can be both a barrier to faith and a sign of it. It is a barrier because it allows us to forget that God's wisdom is inextricably linked to God's timing, and that we can all name at least one time in our lives when we were better off not getting what we wanted when we wanted it. Likewise, we know that sometimes having to wait is a blessing, for no one ever learns patience without having to actually do the hard work of being patient.

Yet, impatience can be a sign of faith for us as well. I believe that in this morning's text, the disciples only asked "When?" because they believed Jesus really was the long awaited messiah. The disciples don't want the whole world, just a change in their own corner of it, but they do want it now. They ask Jesus, "Lord, is now the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" It's a fair question, since restoring the kingdom to Israel is what the messiah was supposed to do. Since Jesus had managed to rise from crucifixion and death, surely he could be expected to overthrow Rome and return control of Israel to its own people.

We are often impatient, not because we do not believe in God, but because we *do*. We know the kind of stuff God is capable of doing, so we naturally want God to do it! In the same way, Christians are people who live in two worlds at once. We are residents of this world, but citizens of God's coming Kingdom, and it is difficult sometimes to wait for this world to look more like the next, especially when you are working so hard to help make it so.

However, Jesus, demonstrating the same kind of divine obedience that led him to the cross, the grave, and eventually his resurrection, tells them that this is not for them to know. This morning's text is not about *knowing*, but about what to *do* and how to live in the meantime, while living on God's time, trusting that God's knowledge, wisdom, and yes, even God's timing is superior to ours.

My favorite part of this text is what the two men in white who miraculously appear at the end of this story utter say, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up

towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go up into heaven.” The ascension of Jesus Christ could easily appear to be the end of the work of Jesus on earth. If this were a scene from a movie, it would be the perfect time for the screen to fade to black and the credits to start to scroll up the screen. Yet, it is not over, neither the story, nor the time of waiting and the need for patience. This is the story of a new beginning of Christ’s work and these disciples, who had already seen and experienced so much, but were not done.

At first, the men in white robes do not seem to make much sense. They ask the disciples why they are looking for Christ in the sky but then proceed to assure them that Christ will return from heaven just as he was taken up into heaven. At first hearing, it would seem like this means that disciples of Christ should always be looking for Jesus in the heavens but doesn’t our duty involves more than simply staring at the sky? Perhaps the message is for us to spend the time until Christ’s return doing something else.

I have heard an expression that says, “Some people are so heavenly bound that they are no earthly good.” This morning’s text is a warning against that kind of Christianity. We can fall prey to the temptation to be looking towards heaven, looking towards another time and place for the return of the Lord instead of seeking and serving him in *this* life and in *this* time and place. Perhaps we are too focused on when we die, hallelujah, by and by, and too little focused on the emerging kingdom in our midst, where the king, crucified and risen, chooses to identify most closely with the hungry, thirsty, naked, stranger, sick, and the prisoner.

When the disciples hear the words “Why are you standing looking up towards heaven,” it is to be a reminder that the work Christ began was not completed in his ascension but that we, as his disciples, were included as his co-workers in his plan for the salvation for the world. Christ did not ascend so that he may live in the clouds. He ascended so that he could be the Lord of all, so he could empower believers all over the world, so he could be the universal, omnipresent Christ.

The thing about following Jesus is that you never have all the answers at once. As nice as it would seem to have all of the answers, to have all of the hard questions of life figured out before setting out on that journey to follow Christ, as nice as it would be to see him coming in the clouds, confirming our faith before our eyes and the eyes of the world, *before* we make the sacrifices necessary to be his disciple, it never works that way. Instead, we live the life *as* we are learning to understand it. We seek Christ *while* we serve him, and we do so, trusting that through the grace of God, we will encounter the living Christ in the world and the life around us, for that is where he has placed and sent us for now.

Sisters and brothers, are you searching for Christ? Where are we searching for him today? Are you in a struggle to find him? Where do you seek the living Christ?

Where do you find him? Are you looking for Christ in the heavens or are you seeking him all around you, in the midst of your greatest need and your greatest hurt and your greatest suffering? Did Christ ascend away *from us* or ascend *for us*, uniting us together as one body and then empowering us to serve, showing us where to go?

Life is often about what we do while we are waiting for something else to happen. Birth and death are inevitable so what we do in the middle is up to us. In this morning's text, when the men in white robes said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" I can imagine the disciples wondering, "What are we to do in the meantime?"

And in this we find the challenge that the church is faced with today. What are *we doing in the meantime?* Are we content to crane our necks, to look at the sky and wait for Christ's return or are we willing to minister to the world like he taught us to?

People of Crozet, why are you looking up toward heaven? This same Jesus who has been taken up into heaven will come in the same way you saw him go into heaven. What are we going to do in the meantime?

Gloria In Excelsis Deo