**September 15, 2024—*“The Work of Waiting”* (Acts 1:12-26)**

I’m wondering whether I’m the only one who hates waiting for things. Anyone else? I know that, personally, I’m really bad at waiting—I get irritated by drivers in front of me who come to complete stops! And whether it’s waiting for commercials to finish, waiting at a medical appointment, or waiting for someone to reply to a text or e-mail, I’m sure there are some of you who are waiting for me to grow in my capacity for waiting!

On a more serious note, though, I’m wondering how many of us find ourselves these days waiting for God to deliver. Are you waiting for Mr. or Mrs. Right, or waiting to start a family? Are you waiting to hear back from that employer or university? Are you waiting for clarity on your future, or waiting for the medical test results to come in? When it comes to the more serious stuff in our lives, what does waiting look like for you?

I’d invite you to turn in your Bible or Bible app to chapter 1 of the book of Acts, as we continue to see how the early Christian church formed and developed, where, today, we’re looking at an interesting moment in human history. Today’s passage takes place between the *ascension* of Jesus (the departure of Jesus’ human body), and *Pentecost* (the arrival of Jesus’ Living Spirit). And in between these two moments, Acts 1:4 said:

***While Jesus was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about…”***

In between the departure of Jesus and the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the disciples were given a singular instruction: they were told to *wait*. But in this passage, we see them do some very specific things that, I believe, can teach us how to live in those moments too.

It turns out, they did stay in Jerusalem, as instructed. Verse 12 of Acts 1 reads:

***Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walkfrom the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.***

After Jesus ascended to heaven, the disciples returned to what was familiar to them as an upper room. Some believe that room is where they experienced the Last Supper with Jesus; others speculate that it’s where Jesus appeared to them in resurrected form—or perhaps both. Regardless, they returned to Jerusalem as instructed by Jesus.

But it’s interesting to observe what they did as they waited. They didn’t just turn on Netflix and start binging. They didn’t pull out the deck of cards and fire up the Euchre. They didn’t book tee times or go for a group hike. They immediately, and constantly, and collectively appealed to God in prayer. The entire core of Jesus’ closest followers, for hours on end over the course of multiple days engaged in prayer together.

And if we can slow down enough to enter into the story with our imaginations, perhaps we can understand why. Remember that these were Jesus’ closest friends and family. Jesus had just died a horrible death, and, even though He’d reappeared in resurrected state, He’d left them again in body. I’m imagining that they missed Him. And I’m imagining that, before His Spirit returned to be their companion, prayer was their way of maintaining contact with him. In this waiting period, I believe that prayer was so consistently necessary for them, as they **cultivated their connection to God**.

Then, in that course of days, they had some business to attend to. Verse 15:

***In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) and said, “Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus… “For,” said Peter, “it is written in the Book of Psalms: ‘May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it,’ and, ‘May another take his place of leadership.’***

At a practical level, the eleven remaining disciples of Jesus—now being referred to as “Apostles”, to differentiate their leadership role from the larger and growing core of Jesus-followers—had to replace Judas. Judas was the one who betrayed Jesus, literally selling Him out to the government. And this passage, as well as Luke’s former biographical account of Jesus’ life, both describe how Judas took that money and bought a field, yet, plagued by the guilt of facilitating Jesus’ death, took his own life.

To these eleven original-disciples-now-Apostles, Judas’ betrayal was surely heartbreaking. And yet, it’s fascinating to hear how Peter, at least, was processing things. To Peter, more than a personal betrayal, it was scriptural fulfillment. Peter was able (maybe because of the prayer he’d been participating in?) to take a step back and see the bigger picture of God at work, in timeless and faithful ways. He quoted a couple of Psalms that, from his perspective, were now being fulfilled by God in their day.

If you can enter into what it must have felt like, as such a close personal friend of Jesus’ (and Judas!), I think this is a somewhat shocking response. Instead of the downbeat of personal hurt and grief, the emphasis is on the sovereignty of God and His timeless faithfulness to deliver on His prophetic promises. That strikes me as significant: that waiting, for them, included **acknowledging the faithfulness of God**.

Well then came the practicality of replacing Judas among them. Verse 21 reads:

***So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. Then they prayed, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.” Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.***

I skipped over some verses that described their criteria for a suitable candidate: they had to have been with Jesus and the original disciples throughout Jesus’ public ministry, in order to be an effective witness of His life, death, and resurrection. But notice, when it came to actually deciding who would replace Judas, after narrowing it down to two, they engaged in a process called “casting lots” to make the call. If you’re unfamiliar with it, the process is effectively like drawing straws. You put two stones in a vessel, and as you shook the vessel aggressively, eventually one of the stones would bounce out—like flipping a coin. But the question isn’t how they cast lots, but, more importantly, why.

This is actually a practice that the Christian church is never again recorded to have done through the remainder of the book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament—presumably, because, when the Holy Spirit came upon them, He provided the gift of discernment, especially collectively, through which they could then make decisions together. Yet, in this interim—between Jesus’ body being with them and Jesus’ Spirit being with them—it feels like they wanted to make absolutely sure that this decision was also ultimately still being made by God. It’s as if, after incorporating their own best logic and criteria, they pulled back and let God, through casting lots, have His say. I’m feeling that it was essential to these early disciples to do whatever it took to **enable the influence of God** to continue, especially in this interim waiting period.

That’s what happens in this period of time archived in the back-half of Acts chapter 1: the core disciples of Jesus are instructed to wait, and wait they do. But what’s fascinating to observe—and, I believe, what’s intended by Luke in recording this one-of-a-kind moment in the history of the church—is that waiting was wasn’t idle; it was active, and engaging, and deliberate, and collective. Waiting wasn’t just passively sitting around; it was actively cultivating connection with God. Waiting wasn’t getting down in the dumps because of their circumstances; it was taking a step back, seeing the bigger picture, and acknowledging the faithfulness of God. And waiting wasn’t white-boarding and strategically planning their own course of action; it was doing whatever it took to enable the influence of God among them. In Acts chapter 1, we see the “work” of spiritually waiting; the difference between “waiting” and “waiting on God”.

If you’ve never heard this term before, I want you to appreciate that this is an essential component of developing discipleship of Jesus: learning the capacity to wait on God. Especially in periods of interim circumstances, spiritual waiting is far more than twiddling your thumbs; it’s an active work that—through cultivating connection, acknowledging faithfulness, and enabling influence—allows God to work in your life, even, or especially, during the period of interim circumstances. And, like any spiritual practice, like exercise, there are spiritual health benefits from growing in this capacity:

***Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.***

Even if you’re feeling beaten down by a season that has you living in the limbo of waiting, you can engage the activity of God in profound ways by learning to wait on Him.

Now, for clarity, that doesn’t mean that waiting on God will necessarily yield the results you’re waiting for. Spiritual waiting is about experiencing God and facilitating the work of God in the present tense of the wilderness period, far more than it’s about trying to manipulate God to deliver certain outcomes that you desire from that waiting period. And yet, if we’ll pattern ourselves after these first-century followers, we can open our hearts and lives to a far greater experience of God in times we’re desperate for Him.

So, let’s consider—first off—how we can **cultivate a connection** to God more consistently. Maybe it means starting your days with a commitment to a prayer time, or reminding yourself throughout the day through worship songs in your car or podcasts on your playlist. Maybe it means starting your week off more consistently with this time together, to receive the encouragement from one another to be God-facing. Or maybe it's time to join a Life Group, to gain the external support mid-week to stay connected.

As well, let’s consider how we can step back, see the bigger picture, and **acknowledge the faithfulness** of God in our lives. For sure, weekly worship helps with that, but so does the spiritual practice of journaling, or sharing testimony with others of times where God was noticeably at work, or creating outright celebrations or mile-markers to remember those moments, in a way that builds a track record of faithfulness.

And let’s ask ourselves what **enabling the influence** of God could look like in our lives these days. As a starter, I’m sure engaging in the month-long reading plan through the book of Luke could expose us to more of Jesus’ heart and desire. So could a mentoring relationship, or perhaps a professional, if we’re looking to really go deeper into shining God’s light of truth into our lives in ways He’d most like to have influence.

The question today is: **what are you waiting for, to start waiting on God?**

I don’t know how this passage meets you today, but, in my life personally, today’s text is incredibly timely. In our home, we’ve found ourselves waiting for medical test results. My wife’s about to enter her fourth year of osteopathy school, only to learn a couple weeks ago that her Toronto campus shut down and is relaunching under a different school—which has us in an uncertain future, full of all kinds of question marks. Someone in our home is waiting to hear from college coaches, and I’m waiting to see how the process of our leadership reimagining a structure for the future clarifies the next season of my role. At some level, in my home these days, nothing is certain, and in a season where we’re waiting on a bunch of stuff, remember: I hate waiting for things! And every default instinct in me wants to fix, solve, plan, and grab hold of whatever I can to move things forward. How could I experience more of God’s presence and activity than ever before if I, instead, actively engaged in the spiritual work of waiting?

Even more than that, I’d feel this passage is tremendously prophetic to our church community these days. As we continue waiting to more fully bounce back from the years of pandemic, as we wait for the fruit of investments we’re making in people across the Niagara Region, as we wait for consultants to facilitate improvements to our workplace culture—even as we wait for me to grow in my capacity for waiting!—we, together, have a choice today. We can sit idly by. We can get down in the dumps and complain. We can take matters into our own hands. Or we can take steps to engage in the spiritual practice of waiting on God, and open ourselves to a greater experience of God’s activity—in the midst of waiting—than perhaps we’ve ever experienced before.

The question, for you, and me, and us together is: **what are you waiting for?** And: what are you waiting for, to engage in the spiritual practice of waiting on God?