

Sunday, May 12, 2024
Seventh Sunday of Easter (Year B)

Acts 1.15-17, 21-26; John 17.6-19

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/246557415180898>

(Sermon begins at about 21:35)

“Between Times”

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Liturgically speaking, right now we find ourselves in a “between time.” A time between one event signaling the end of an old way of being and an impending event demarcating the beginning of a new way of being. We celebrated the feast of the Ascension this past Thursday. This event—the resurrected Christ ascending into heaven—signaled the end of a way of being for the disciples. In the 40 days after Christ’s resurrection, they had enjoyed time with their beloved friend and teacher, almost like old times. All appeared to be right in the world after the horrors of Jesus’ crucifixion. But that all changed with his departure, with his ascension to heaven. Prior to his ascension, Jesus did give his disciples an indication of what is to come. In the account of the Ascension in Acts, Jesus tells them, “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” (Acts 1.8). They may not have been completely clear on what Jesus was talking about, but we know that he was referring to the impending Pentecost event. And while we know it was a mere ten days to Pentecost, the disciples had no idea how long they would have to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. If there was anything they had learned from Jesus, God operates on his own schedule.

Given the unknowns, the disciples had three choices. First, they could have said, “forget this. We’re going back to our old lives before Jesus came on the scene.” Second, they could have sat around and twiddled their thumbs, waiting to see what would happen next. Or third, they could use the time, however long that might be, to prepare for whatever would come next; to prepare for whatever followed the coming of the Holy Spirit. Although they actually had a pretty good idea of at least the framework: “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Which certainly seems to imply once the Holy Spirit comes—whatever that looks like—they will be called into action. Sounds like they are going to be on the move, continuing Jesus’ ministry of spreading the Good News. And it looks like it will be a lot of work. Not just spreading the Good News locally, but “to the ends of the earth.”

That being the case, perhaps they should use this between time to prepare. Even if they don’t know exactly what they will need to do after the Holy Spirit comes, it’s pretty obvious from Jesus’ last words to them that they are going to be busy. So best to position themselves for whatever comes next. As any of us who have been in business knows, that often means ramping up staffing. And the disciples were down a man, with the loss of Judas Iscariot. As we hear in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, they set about choosing a successor to

Judas. “And the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.” The management team is complete. Now they wait. For Pentecost, for the coming of the Holy Spirit, and for whatever flows from that. Such is the nature of between times: always waiting; preparing where possible.

We’re all familiar with between times. We all have a variety of them over the course of our lives—some brief and some of a longer duration. Each between time bringing with it a period of preparation in anticipation of whatever comes next. Much of our early lives are a string of between times, as we prepare and transition from elementary school to middle school to high school, and on into either higher education or the workforce. As we go through the various stages of life, there are much more obvious between times. Such as the time when a couple is engaged—the time between being single and being married; a time necessitating much preparation for what comes next. Particularly in terms of wedding preparations, setting up a new household, making plans of for a life together. This being Mother’s Day, one of the obvious between times for those who are mothers is pregnancy—the between time that sees the change in a woman’s own body to accommodate the life growing within. And of course, the preparations not only for the birth of the child, but for all that goes with it in terms of transitioning to a whole new way of life.

Other between times that entail a period of transition from one way of being to another, of one way of life to another, include changes of employment, moving from one job to another. For some of us, an entire change of career, which may include extended preparation, such as additional education. For nearly all of us, life eventually brings retirement, resulting in another between time as we transition from working life to what will hopefully be a more leisurely life. The list goes on and on. Although the common thread is that in these various between times in our lives, some intentional work or activity is needed in preparation for transition to the new way of life and being.

Just as we experience a variety of between times in our own lives, the situation with the disciples being in a between time is nothing new in the Bible. Throughout Scripture we see a number of between times punctuating salvation history. The story of Noah and the Flood, in which Noah and his family are in a between time—between the destruction of a corrupt world and the beginning of new life for God’s creation; a time to care for the remnant of creation to ensure that new life will have the opportunity to grow and thrive. The Exodus, in which God’s Chosen People are in a between time—between their liberation from slavery in Egypt and the beginning of their new life in the Promised Land; a time of formation during which they become reacquainted with God and learn what it means to be God’s people. These are just two major examples. The Bible is filled with numerous other between times, both for God’s people as a whole and for individuals. Times of transition and transformation as individual people and entire communities are called to move from an old way of being to a new way of being.

Our Gospel reading from John is another example. One that is at the same time about transition for those who follow Jesus—the disciples—and by extension, all who would become members of the Body of Christ. This passage is yet another portion of Jesus’ Farewell Discourse, delivered to the disciples at the Last Supper the night before his crucifixion. In the portion we heard today, Jesus is praying, asking God’s strength and guidance for the disciples. But it is also part of

Jesus' final instructions to his disciples. In this prayer, Jesus says, "And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world." Recognizing the inevitable—that Jesus will be executed. And yet, his ministry will not die with him. A little later, he closes the loop when he says, "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." Confirmation that it is his expectation that his followers will take up his mantle and continue what he has begun. In so doing, Jesus is foretelling yet another between time for his disciples. And possibly, for all who will come to follow him.

Now, in terms of between times, this one is a little more nebulous, at least in terms of the timeframe to which Jesus was referring. Was this between time just that between his death and his resurrection? A period of just a couple of days, which was, nonetheless, a significant between time for the disciples. A time of profound grief, in which they tried to come to grips with just how they would honor their master's wishes in carrying on his ministry. Or was this between time even longer, being the time until his departure—his ascension? Or maybe even beyond that, to the Pentecost event and the coming of the Holy Spirit? Or, you could even make the case that Jesus was proclaiming the beginning of a between time that began with his death and resurrection and would continue until his Second Coming. All are plausible. All are applicable between times in our life of faith.

While we currently find ourselves liturgically in the between time that is the ten days between the Ascension and Pentecost, we know that we are not actually in that particular between time described in Scripture. That is part of our history. For us, this is just part of our annual cycle of the celebration of salvation history and the variety of between times contained therein. It is part of our way of honoring the various between times that have brought us to who we are as the Body of Christ. It is part of our way of honoring the various between times that have brought us to where we each are in our individual lives of faith. And yet, this very obvious liturgical between time, between Ascension and Pentecost, and the associated readings, make it clear that, when it comes to the overall arc of salvation history, we are in that broader, more expansive time between the First and Second Comings. The time between Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension, and his promised return at the end of the ages.

That being the case, Christianity is a religion existing in a between time. The Church as an institution most certainly exists in a between time. The Church is, in many ways, the embodiment of this between time extending from Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension to his Second Coming. We don't always recognize this as a between time because of the extended duration. Then again, those wandering in the wilderness for 40 years probably did not view that as a between time, either. Yet here we are. Most definitely in a time between. And what have we learned from the various Scriptural accounts of what it means to exist in such between times? What have we learned from our own personal experiences existing in such between times?

That we must not sit by idly and twiddle our thumbs. That we need to always be about the work of preparation. Even if we don't quite know what will come next. But what we do know is that during this time, as Jesus sent the disciples, we have likewise been sent into the world to proclaim the Good News. We have been sent into the world to embody Christ's commandments to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Our job is to continually

find ways to do just that. And given the state of our world today, that is more than enough to keep us busy in this between time.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!