

LUKE 24:44-53

44 Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46 and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; **so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.**" 50 Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. 51 While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. 52 And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; 53 and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Karen and I have been together for nearly ten months now. We have always had the sense that however much time we have actually spent together, it never seems like it's been that length of time. "Has it only been X months?" and "It's already been X amount of time?" are both equally likely to come out of our mouths when this subject comes up.

I just realized that we had been together for nine months at the end of April. On the one hand, that's not very long; we're still very much getting to know each other. But it occurred to me that this is the same amount of time it takes to grow a baby. And this thought gave me pause.

As most of you know, my daughter, Sarah, is due to deliver her first baby in October. Besides the frustration of not being able to really be with her during this time, I had forgotten just how dang much waiting is involved with pregnancy. Looking back on when I was having kids (well, not me actually, but you know what I mean!), pregnancy flew by, as did most of my kids' childhoods. But going through this with Sarah, I'm remember how incredibly long it seemed to take to get through every week of the 40 weeks from conception to birth. It just takes that long to grow a baby. It is what it is and there's nothing you can do to hurry up the process.

That doesn't mean that Sarah and her husband, Ryan, are just sitting on their hands while they wait. Oh no. They're busy getting the nursery and house ready for their child's arrival. In a couple of weeks they will find out the sex; then will begin the process of considering toys and clothing and the color of the room, etc.

The other thing they are doing is making sure that they both do the best job they can do of taking care of Sarah. She is more than just Sarah anymore; she is an incubator of life, and soon to be a mother. So she must love and care for herself the same way she would with this baby she is growing within her body.

This week we heard both of Luke's accounts of the Ascension. While they are not identical, they have much in common. First, the disciples are promised that, though Jesus is leaving them, he will be sending something really special to them – “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Luke) and “clothed with power from on high” (Acts). Second, they have been told to stay in Jerusalem until this happens. They are told this amazing, stupendous, powerful, life-changing thing is going to happen to them – something that will empower them to be witnesses, which they have not been terribly good at so far – and then they are told to wait. How long? Days.

And when they ask if now is the time that he will restore the kingdom to Israel, he tells them that this information is not for them to know. “It is not for you to know the times and periods that the father has set by his own authority.” When are you going to complete your work here and in us, they ask. And the answer is that you cannot know how long.

And yet, we are told in Acts that they, “returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.”

We are just coming off a number of readings from John where the disciples are distressed that Jesus is leaving them. In these accounts, the disciples are practically giddy with joy...right after Jesus has left them. What's up with that?

Two things have to be true in order for them to feel so differently about Jesus' departure. First, they had to believe Jesus when he told them that would actually happen to them in the near future. Second, they had to believe that it was, in fact, something really, really good. And because of those two things, they rejoiced...much as a couple rejoices when they find out that they are pregnant. Even though there are miles to go before the baby will be born, there is so much growth that needs to take place before they will finally be able to meet their child, they are filled with joy. (Trust me on this. I'm going through it right now with Sarah!)

We find ourselves, once again, in a similar place as the disciples are this Sunday. We have a God who promises to work good in and through us, no matter what. We even boast in our suffering, because suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and this hope shall not disappoint because of the love of God that has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

What this means is that God desires to work good in and through this time – this liminal space we're all in – for good. I believe that God desires that something new come into the world through YOU. Yes you! And US!

It is so very easy to notice everything about this time that is disruptive, to experience all the losses and all the grief. I don't think there's one thing bad and horrible about these days that I *haven't* noticed. I think that's the way it always is. I figured out a long time ago that this is the case. Pain and discomfort always seem to get my undivided attention. But the tremendous blessings God continually rains down upon me? Not so much.

This is no way to go through life. The good that God longs for us to have is worth much more attention than what I almost always give it.

I have long warned people to stay away from church and reading the Bible if they like how their lives are. Hebrews tells us that, "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." If you hang around God's word and God's people too much, it's gonna change you. So be careful. You might catch something.

And I've always believed that if anyone should actually "deserve" to be a saint, it was Mary, the mother of our Lord. When the angel came to her, he invited her to give birth to the Son of God, the Savior of the world. Whether she completely understood the implications of her response or not is debatable, but her answer is not. *Let it be with me according to your word.* And because of her response, the fabric of reality is forever changed.

God's word is continually a word of invitation. God always has something that he longs for us to birth into this world. That's why it is so dangerous to those who are happy with their lives, but so transformational for those who long for something better.

So, what if God is coming to you during this time? What if God is inviting you to bear something new into the world? Everything that will be born has a certain gestational period. With Sarah, as with all human mothers, it will take around 40 weeks. With whatever God may be asking to be born through you, we do not know. But we are being told to wait.

All the best science that we know says that we need to wait before we can get together as a church again. It feels just awful, in part because of the unknown. How long will it take? Will there be any more pain or loss along the way? Will it be scary? Will I need to make great sacrifices in order to bring this thing to life? To these we have no answer. But if God has begun a good work in you, he will most certainly bring it to completion.

In the meantime, maybe taking a page out of the disciples' book would be a good place to start. After Jesus ascended, we are told that they "returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God." Perhaps finding joy in the promise that God can work through whatever seemingly crappy situation we can go through to bring about something new and good into this world. And while we cannot be in the "temple" blessing God, we also know that we do not need to be in the church building to be in the presence of God and to share in the communion of saints.

We are also told a few verses after today's reading from Acts, that they "were constantly devoting themselves to prayer" during this time of waiting. Often times we hear the phrase, "All there is to do now is to pray," as if that's somehow cold consolation. But we know prayer to be an intentional tapping into the power of the universe, to the creator, savior and sustainer of all life.

So I ask you to pray that God would, indeed, plant seeds in your life during these days of waiting, and that God would give you the patience to continue to wait, the vision and trust to find joy in the waiting, and to care for yourselves and each other with the same love that you would give to a new born child.