

Weird Windows of Time

Acts 1

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on May 24, 2020

Today we find the disciples in a circumstance we should find to be relatable. They are living inside one of those bizarre windows of time. A time where the usual rules don't apply. Where old assumptions can no longer be taken for granted. And they are gradually realizing that things won't really be the same again.

In their case, the bizarre window of time is that between the Ascension and Pentecost. Jesus has left them. He has returned to dwell at the right hand of the Father. But the Holy Spirit, God's promised new way of being present with them, has not yet come. Up to this point, their discipleship has consisted primarily in waking up and then following Jesus wherever he felt like going that day—listening when he stopped to preach, occasionally assisting in the distribution of miraculously multiplied bread and fish, and often putting it upon themselves to provide security and crowd control that Jesus did not want. Now everything was going to change. Even though Jesus promised, as he does in John 16, that his leaving and the Spirit's coming was for their own good, that must have been a hard thing to really believe.

A Spirit, surely, would be much more difficult to follow than a body. And not only did they need to learn how this all was going to work now, they would have to learn first and quickly—so they could show everyone else. They would have to graduate from their time as followers and emerge now as leaders—as preachers and miracle-workers themselves. Even if there was some excitement about moving into this new future, there must have been some sadness about what they were leaving behind. The predictability of their togetherness, their daily rhythms. The comfort of being able to reach out and touch Jesus in the middle of the storm.

We are certainly living inside a bizarre window of time where old assumptions are being cast aside and we know very little about our future other than that it will be different than the past. It does feel a bit like Jesus has left us too. Or been taken away from us more like. At least church has been taken away from us. Or Church has been so rearranged that it feels like it. God's realness feels less real when the mechanism through which church is delivered into my home is the same screen on which I watched 7 episodes of Shitt's Creek yesterday. God feels less real when there is no bread that can be pressed into my palms or wine that sweetly bite my taste buds. When there is no friend to reach out and touch in the middle of this storm.

There are two things that God is saying to his disciples in these bizarre windows of time.

The first I already mentioned, which is this: Jesus really means it when he says that it is better for him to go and for the Spirit to come. The reason is because believe it or not, in the Spirit God can come even closer to you than God does in the Son. In the Son, God takes on human flesh; in the Spirit, God comes to dwell in your human flesh—in your heart, body, and soul. To borrow a phrase from St. Augustine, by the Spirit, received in your baptism, God is closer to you than you are to yourself. Even though Jesus ascending feels like God is leaving, it is only the beginning of God coming closer than ever.

I don't know where you are today in processing this global crisis, whether you're still in denial, or still whirling from its initial impact; if you have moved on to heroic response mode, perhaps you are brimming with optimism for what a new future might bring then again maybe you feel yourself slipping into disillusionment and depression. There is no right or wrong way to respond to a pandemic.

What I know is this: In my life as a pastor, whenever I ask people when in their life they felt closest to God, or when in their life they had all-time feelings of faith, they never refer to some Thursday where everything was just exquisitely normal. They never even refer to moments of personal triumph. They never say, "The day I got that promotion" or "the day I sank that 45 foot putt" or "when I got an 'A' on that paper" I just knew God was real. They always say "It was there in the hospital room when she was nearing her last moments and she opened her eyes one last time and in those eyes I could see that she was saying 'I love you' one last time and that's when I knew that God was going to look after us when she was gone."

Perhaps God is always close to us, and moments of crisis are simply moments when we tend to wake up to the fact that God has been there all along waiting for us to wake up to his presence. The coronavirus has stripped away the veneers and distractions of ordinary life and put us all into a moment of crisis. It has put the church into exile. But remember exile is precisely where Israel rediscovered and renewed its own faith. This exile has already set many of us on reinvigorated journeys of looking for God. It will yet launch many more. May you find that God has been looking for you.

Notice what the disciples do. They gather back in the Upper Room and the text says "they were constantly devoting themselves to prayer." Their moment of crisis became a moment of renewal for their faith. May it be the same for us. May we now dedicate ourselves constantly to prayer. This pandemic may just bring about the renewal of the church.

The second thing God is saying to his disciples then and now is a particular word to those of us who settings remain switched to hero mode. To disciples stressed about quickly learning how this Holy Spirit thing will work. To the parents doggedly determined to keep their children from missing a single milestone moment. To worried grandmothers arming themselves and everyone in their contact list with every most up-to-date piece of coronavirus vaccine news. To anxious hearts powerless to solve the virus doubling down instead on proselytizing their politics. To pastors skipping their day off again because they respond to stress by insisting on doing everything themselves.

The word to all the heroes comes from our reading in Acts: "As they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." This one bears a little explanation. Remember the context of this moment. The Jesus revolution, which had obtained a significant following and major cultural momentum, had finished in spectacular failure. Their march on the capital city ended in arrest and execution. The crowds turned and then dispersed. But then Jesus the revolutionary came back from the dead. And he was appearing to disciples all over Israel. And rumors spread. And a movement that was dead itself might have a chance of coming back to life. "Lord is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?" the disciples now ask. "Now it's time to really get to work! We'll organize a resurrection tour. Now we'll show those stupid high priests. And those ugly Romans." In this exact moment, where it just looks like an ember might be blown back into a flame, Jesus, the

savior of the world, the one through whom all things were created, the one who died and rose again, after 50 days with his disciples looked around and said, “No. I have done enough. It is time for me to go.”

If Jesus can say he has done enough, then surely you can too. Or to put it more directly—and I mean this in all love, because I am preaching more to myself than anyone else—the salvation of the world does not lie on your shoulders. The future does not depend on you. Both the past, the present, and the future rests on the shoulders of one who died and rose again and who 50 days later said “it is finished. It is enough.” Your own exhaustion is not a sacrament God is interested in. You do not need to earn it.

The Ascension is saying to all of us: the defining event of our lives is not the coronavirus. The event that will shape our future is not the coronavirus. No. The most consequential, the most important, the most determinative event in the history of the world is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And that already happened. It happened 2,000 years ago. Believe it or not, these are precedented times. The world has faced plague and disease countless times before. And victory over the coronavirus, victory over every evil, victory over death itself, has already been accomplished on your behalf. Rest. Breathe. He has ascended. It is finished.

Amen.