

The Rev. Nancy Conklin
Sermon
Sunday, Sept. 18, 2022

After seeing Jesus ascend into heaven, the Apostles do what Jesus had told them to do — go to Jerusalem and wait for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Luke, always wanting to be very detailed in his storytelling, tells us that walk to Jerusalem was a relatively short one. So, we can imagine the Apostles didn't have much time to process their final conversation with Jesus, let alone after watching him ascend into heaven before their very eyes.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, the Apostles retreated to an upper room in the house in which they were staying, reminiscent of the first time the Risen Lord appeared among them. Then, they were hiding behind locked doors, filled with great fear and inconsolable grief. Luke gives us a roll call of those present. First, he names the remaining 11 disciples, to be sure we notice who is absent from the chosen 12 — Judas the Betrayer. Also, among the faithful present, were Jesus' family, including Mary and his brothers. Daily, they met together to pray and to wait for the baptism of the Holy Spirit, not knowing when or how it might happen. Luke tells us that circle grew to include 120 other believers, all of them gathering each to pray and wait, wait and pray.

Until one day, Peter assumes the role of leader, living into his divinely appointed identity as the Rock upon whom the church will be built. His first official act of leadership is to determine the small community's most pressing need — the 11 Apostles must become 12 again. Jesus had intentionally chosen 12 disciples who would become foundational representatives of the 12 tribes in the messianic kingdom he was bringing to life here on earth. Peter begins his address to the crowd by recounting the story of Judas. Interesting, because presumably, by that time, everyone must have heard all the scandalous details of his betrayal and death. We notice that Peter isn't simply retelling the story of what happened, he is proclaiming that Judas' betrayal and death was the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy. His reason for doing so will soon become clear.

Peter announces that according to that same prophecy, a replacement for Judas must be found — someone who had been an eyewitness to the life and ministry of Jesus from the beginning. Of critical importance, that person must have had an encounter with the resurrected Jesus. Decently and in order, the Apostles nominate two men who fulfill both criteria. Then, they pray seeking to know whom the Lord has chosen. Then, in accordance with ancient custom, they cast lots to discern his divine will. Matthias is chosen to become the 12th Apostle — fully restoring the Apostles to becoming the foundational representatives in the Messianic kingdom Jesus inaugurated on earth.

Peter's first act of leadership sounds like a logical first step for the Apostles — to begin to reorganize themselves for the work of ministry to which Jesus commissioned them; to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. Yet, we might also be prone to wonder if the timing of his decision wasn't also another example of Peter's impetuous nature. Praying and waiting on the Spirit was one thing; now it was time to do something, or so he thought. We get it. Sitting around and waiting for guidance from on high isn't really our strong suit either. It requires a lot of patience and a bit of self-restraint to sit and wait. We're more apt to look for something we can do while we wait. Usually, it's something we already know how to do, or what we've always

done, convinced it's our problem to fix by simply restoring what had been before. Leaning in, listening, praying, and waiting on the Spirit goes against our natural instincts — our can-do personalities. And, so, more often than not, we fill that space meant to be left open for a new movement of the Spirit.

We can also imagine the comfort and strength those gathered felt when their fractured community was made whole again. We have those same moments in our own lives when we wish to quickly forget the past, bury it, and move on, made all the more easier by how we remember the past. What details we choose to retain and those we choose to forget; how much we realize, in the fullest sense of the word, the impact it had upon our lives. When we lean in and listen to Peter's words, we hear a deeper motive for his urgent need to replace Judas. That they were down a man was too much of a constant reminder not just of Judas' betrayal, but of their own — a mirror in which they saw their own failures during Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion; their initial disbelief in the resurrection that kept them hiding in fear. Attempting to rid Judas from their memory once and for all and banish their own residual shame: that was really Peter's first official act of leadership.

We can also hear it in his prayer to Jesus — “he has deserted us and gone where he belongs.” “Deserted us,” not “betrayed you.” “He has gone where he belongs,” meaning “he's rotting in hell, there'll be no redemption for him.” A prayer from the heart of impetuous Peter who denied Jesus three times and contrite Simon whom Jesus forgave three times. Those early followers of Jesus had just begun to grasp the reality of resurrection and what it means for those who have died. Especially for those who have died in shame and guilt. That startling realization that the resurrection power of Jesus reaches into the grave, even into Judas' grave, had not yet dawned upon them.

Was the replacement of Matthias a wise and discerning act of leadership, or was it a hope for a much more meaningful gift of forgiveness for the entire lot of them? Was the 11 Apostles again becoming the full representation of the 12 tribes of Israel in the messianic kingdom a foreshadowing of a greater act of forgiveness that is about to unfold before them in this dawning age of the Spirit?

Pentecost is coming, and those early Apostles couldn't begin to imagine what God was about to do. This is the first of many cliffhangers in Luke's retelling of the Acts of the Apostles. For now, they must continue to gather together to pray and wait, wait and pray.