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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Acts 1:12-26

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And They Prayed

Over the last few months, we have journeyed together through the wilderness of Lent, through the excitement and sorrow of Holy week, and into the challenging and hope-filled season of resurrection. In the wilderness, we explored those pieces of our experience that are deep and true. Deep relationship, accompanied by deep commitment and deep wisdom, leads to deep healing and deep growth. Experiences of deep healing and growth then form the foundation for deep hope and deep living. In the excitement and sorrow of Holy Week, we explored the experiences of Jesus during his arrest and trial, in which his closest friends and followers abandoned him to the Jewish and Roman authorities. As Jesus was forced in those dark moments, we have been forced by this past year to confront our own feelings of abandonment and loneliness as our interactions and movements have been stifled.

Those experiences, feelings, and dark places are not where we stayed. Since Easter Sunday, we have rejoiced in our savior and lord, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Messiah of Israel, resurrected from an unjust and cruel death. We cling to Jesus, our promise, hope, and inspiration for resurrection life. Since Easter Sunday, we have sought out the resurrected Jesus in the gospel stories of his appearances to his disciples. Like the disciples, we have struggled to make sense of Jesus's resurrection. Like the disciples, we have experienced Jesus, so we cannot return to life as it was before. We cannot go back to fishing, or life before Jesus. He has called us to something bigger, more radical, and more life-giving.

But last week, Jesus left, taken up into heaven, seated at God's right hand, the true Lord and King. In the first century, only Caesar had ascended to his supposedly rightful place among the gods as both a deity and king. After experiencing Jesus, the disciples know that Caesar could not be Lord of the world. Jesus has shown-up all world rulers even to the present day that true peace and hope and love come from sacrifice, not from violence, warfare, conquering, or intimidation. We follow a King like no other king in history, a master like no other master in history. But our leader and teacher is gone now.

Like the disciples staring at the sky where Jesus had disappeared, we wonder too where Jesus has gone, wanting more time with him to ask questions and draft mission statements and hold meetings and form a plan for changing the world. We, and the disciples, are waiting now. Jesus has promised power; the spirit, the breath of God. What had brought life in the first creation to the first human beings is again going to bring new life to these human beings who have followed Jesus into the light and life of resurrection. We must wait... and pray.

After two heavenly messengers pull them from their cloud-watching, the disciples return to Jerusalem to join the rest of the followers. This large group in the upper room wait together, praying for God's direction and provision in this unknown. How long must we wait? When will we know? After some time in prayer and with Peter's emerging leadership, this early church decides to replace Judas Iscariot, another eyewitness who has journeyed with them from the beginning of Jesus's ministry. They settle on two men, Justus and Matthias. They pray over these two men and then cast lots, which is a way of asking for God's direct intervention in the midst of chance and probability. The lot falls to Matthias, now the 12th disciple. The nation of Israel has been completed again, symbolically in the new community that Jesus has chosen. They will carry on Jesus's mission as participants in the much larger story of ancient Israel's journey with God.

They continue to wait and pray. In comparison to the last three years and even the last couple of months, life has slowed down considerably. This early church has these moments to be still and listen to God's leading. These moments in Acts chapter 1 form and shape the transition period between the physical presence of Jesus and the soon-coming Spirit. I wonder if, in this transition, these early church people were angry with Jesus for leaving them or fearful of the Jerusalem and Roman authorities or frustrated with Judas who had caused all of this and now was gone. Or maybe the uncertainty of their future together and how soon Jesus's promise would come made them anxious and impatient. When we think of the transitions that we have gone through, these feelings should sound familiar. Transition times in our lives are always difficult. Lacking a sense of purpose and waiting on the next thing, we are often forced by our present circumstances to sit in our own thoughts and emotions, struggling with truths that we have not wanted to hear or yearning for the stability of the time before.

For individuals, these transitions might be the waiting period between ending one job and starting another; for those seeking a partner, the waiting period between ending one relationship and starting another; for those entering retirement, the waiting period between ending one's life-long occupation and the new work that will fill retirement; for a family moving, the waiting period between getting out of one space and moving all of your possessions into another space; finally for those with the deteriorating health of a loved one, the waiting period between diagnosis and passing on to heaven. In our present moment, graduating students are in transition as they end one type of schooling and enter university, work, or technical education.

Like the early church, communities also go through transition periods. Hutterthal is nearing the end of a leadership transition that has been years-long and will come to an end as we continue to get to know each other in these early months and settle into this next season of

ministry. As a nation, we are in a months-long transition as we continue to come out of the pandemic and all of its effects. As you think about other times of transition in your life or the life of your community, how have you responded to those transitions? Did you feel fear or anxiety or loss? Were you worried about the future? The disciples give us an example to follow in the midst of transition, in the midst of the unknown and uncertainty. First, we wait, which means that we have to slow down, change our habits, hold off, sit, or be present, which are all quite difficult because our culture and society have conditioned us to expect what we want to be fulfilled now or at least, with free 2-day shipping. Second, we pray... for wisdom and discernment and strength and inspiration and hope even when we are struggling to make sense of what is happening all around us. Remember though that prayer is a conversation, in which we not only make our needs and anxieties known to ourselves and God, but we also listen to what God might be speaking, which is the reason that we must slow down long enough to hear.

Last, what is keeping the disciples grounded and centered as they wait and pray is that they are doing all of this in community, with people who are also committed to and seeking God's kingdom in the present moment. May our response be the same as we transition from COVID restrictions to normalcy and as we grow to know our new pastor. As we discern where God is leading and where the winds of the Spirit are blowing, we wait and pray together.