

“In Between Time”

“Ain’t We Got Fun?” was a song with music by Richard A. Whiting, lyrics by Raymond B. Egan and Gus Kahn, written in 1921 before the Great Depression. Its popularity rose in the aftermath of Black Tuesday (October 29, 1929).

Originally considered a “ditty,” the song became a representation of many people’s determination to face the future with resolve.

*“In the mornin’, in the evenin’ ain’t we got fun?
Not much money, oh, but honey, ain’t we got fun?
The rent’s unpaid, dear; we haven’t a bus
But smiles were made, dear, for people like us”*

The idea is that, no matter what obstacles life throws into your path, you can face it all with a smile and the pluck to hang together.

The line that came to me for this sermon was this one:

*“In the winter in the summer don’t we have fun?
Times are bum and getting bummer, still we have fun
There’s nothing surer: The rich get rich and the poor get poorer.
In the meantime, in between time, ain’t we got fun?”*

The reason that stanza captivates me is because you and I live “*in between time*”

This is the message of the Feast of the Ascension. I used to delight to say that Church celebrates that festival, but as was true for us this past week, we did not even observe it. It has been called “the forgotten” festival, with good reason.

Part of the problem, of course, is that it always is observed on a Thursday, so for churches who have carved out Sunday as the only day for worship, we jump over Ascension Day so that we have to look back on it the following Sunday, which is today.

Another part of the problem with the Feast of the Ascension is that we are not quite sure what to do with it. Christmas obviously gets us pumped (although too often for reasons that have nothing to do with our faith and more to do with our greed). Easter has that excitement of the empty tomb and visions of angels announcing, ***“He is risen”*** (echoes of which have resounded even to this day). Pentecost falls on a Sunday, but doesn’t get quite the hype in Lutheran circles because we have not yet figured out whether or not we should be excited about the Holy Spirit.

So back to Ascension Day: It has not been an occasion of gift-giving (strike one). It does have angels as part of the narrative, but lacks the “wow” factor of Easter (strike two). Before the next pitch, let’s take a closer look at this event called the Ascension of Our Lord, and learn what it means to live “in between time”

As we study the narrative Luke relates for us in the Book of Acts, we encounter ourselves in many ways; this is mirrored to us in the disciples.

First, there is confusion. As we read all four Gospel narratives, we see continually that the Twelve (now the Eleven with the demise of Judas) do not grasp who Jesus is and what He is doing. Does this bother Jesus? Yes! Just two Sundays ago we read St. John’s report of this exchange between Jesus and Philip: ***“Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”?”***” [John 14:8-9]

Back when Peter made his bold confession of faith to Jesus — ***“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”*** [Matthew 16:16] — Jesus announces him blessed; but then, as Jesus begins to define that being “Christ” meant suffering and death, Peter chides Him for such talk and Jesus pronounces him no longer “blessed” but “Satan.”

I think I have said this publicly before: When I was in high school I painted a portrait of Jesus; I painted Him bald because if I would have

had to deal with those Twelve I'd have pulled out all my hair. Now, here at the Ascension, the same lack of comprehension is on display.

Think back with me what had been the experience of these disciples: They had seen miracle after miracle — healings, cleansings, exorcisms, feedings, even resurrections — so you would think they had to have some clue as to who and what Jesus was. They had listened to His teaching — much of it very public; some of it for their ears only — and all of it pointedly giving them the message of what He had been sent among us to do. “. . . *the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*” [Matthew 20:28] “. . . *the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.*” [Luke 19:10] “*I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.*” [Luke 5:32] “*I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness.*” [John 12:46]

They themselves had been sent out and came back with story after story of how greatly the power of God was already moving in and through them: “*even the demons submit to us!*” [Luke 10:17b] They had watched in horror His Passion and death and then, with even greater explosive possibility, His resurrection and the many recorded episodes of His appearances to them and to others.

Yet here they come together with their Risen Master, and what's question they want answered? “*Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*” Ya think Jesus just maybe wanted to pull out each and every last hair on His head at that point? I do — but more than likely that is because that is what I would want to do, and so I join the Twelve in my foolish response, thinking that Jesus should act and react as do I.

How does Jesus deal with this lack of comprehension? As He had done so many times before: with loving patience. We have three narratives that purport to give us the last words of Jesus. John ends his Gospel with Jesus telling Peter, “*Follow me.*” [John 21:22] Matthew ends his Gospel with these familiar words from Jesus: “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all*

nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” [Matthew 28:18-20] Luke alone gives us the verbal depiction of the Ascension and these as Jesus’ final words: ***“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But 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 1:7-8]

All three of those have this as a common thread: in between time, in the absence of Jesus, we are still to follow Him and do the works He did.

Jesus in loving patience does not chide them for their foolish (or at the very least, inappropriate) question. Instead, He makes Himself their equal (“God with us”) by affirming that even He does not know the Father’s timetable.

This is something to which we should pay very close attention: ***“It is not for you to know . . .”*** This does not mean that it is beyond our comprehension; Jesus could have said *“Look, the Mayans got it all wrong; the real date is . . .”* and then we would have known (although, could those Eleven have grasped the concept of 3765 A.D.?). This does not mean that, if we would just spend more time trying to figure this out, we would wind up with an accurate due date.

A “due date” for what? The Eleven were looking for the restoration of Israel. Many Evangelicals today want something like that, convinced that they could maneuver the timetable with the right keys to current status of Israel. But most people are concerned to know the “end time” — when will Jesus come back? When will this world end? Do you know what we can say with certainty about that? ***“It will end. Amen.”***

“It is not for you to know . . .” tells us we are not to spend one second pondering those questions — not one second.

So where do we need to focus? On those last, last words of Jesus: ***“But***

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.” (Just as an aside: The remainder of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles is about God fulfilling that vision — which is also part of living “in between time.”)

With that committed to the disciples, Jesus leaves. It is a rather dramatic departure. He doesn't just vanish (poof!), as He had, for example, with the Emmaus disciples. He doesn't do a Star Trek transporter job (“Beam me up, Scotty!”) and kind of radiate into nothingness. He rises, or as Luke tells us, ***“he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”***

I imagine that this took some time — much like when we have watched launches from Cape Canaveral (then Cape Kennedy, now Cape Canaveral, again) and the camera follows the trajectory of the rocket up, up, up — until it disappears from view.

The reason I think this is the scene is because, without warning, ***“two men in white robes stood by them.”*** How did they get there? If I'm studying the sky it would not be hard for you or anyone else to come up from behind me and scare the bejeebers out of me — as I am sure these two men shocked the Eleven.

Then these two ask what must have seemed to the disciples a silly question: ***“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”*** Well duh! We're watching Jesus ascend. Who wouldn't be looking up? But do you catch the impact of that question and how non-foolish it is?

Jesus last words? ***“You will . . . you will . . .”*** so there is no standing and looking (bows to Yoda); there is now only getting the power and witnessing — so scoot! Jesus had told the disciples previously not to leave the city ***“until you have been clothed with power from on high.”*** [Luke 24:49] So they headed back there.

Now pay close attention to what they did when they got there. They

stayed together — they realized they needed one another. Jesus had sent them out two by two, so they are named as pairs here. More to the point, waiting alone is the pits; it is always better to wait with others (which is what makes our situation with this coronavirus an even bigger problem).

They had no idea what being “*clothed with power from on high*” was like — so they sought to be with one another to prepare. How? They prayed — constantly, earnestly, devotedly. Prayer would shape them and position them to be ready when that power came. If they were asking God for anything, I would think it would be that they would be readied to receive what God wanted them to have.

This was more than likely not intercessory prayer, but relational prayer. It bound them more closely to one another. It helped them to be centered on God. It prepared them to be a welcoming community of faith. They did indeed welcome in others — specifically women and the family of Jesus.

The earliest church set the bar for us: they saw themselves not as an exclusive club, but as an inclusive family. This is the model we need to follow. Not as we wait to be clothed with power; but because we have already been clothed with power.

We seek out one another to magnify that power. We come together, drawn by that power so that we might be even more energized by that power. We pray — constantly, earnestly, devotedly — to be shown how that power is to direct our lives. We seek out others to draw into the circle so that they, too, might experience the power.

Having now used the term “the power” to distraction, we need to personalize that, as well — it is the Holy Spirit. Personalized to each of us — a person with whom we relate and from we draw our life; not an idea, a being, a thing — a person.

Jesus had told the disciples: “ . . . *it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.*” [John 16:7]

Today we stand in between time — liturgically we are with the disciples awaiting the fulfillment of that promise. We have the advantage here; we know how it comes out. In the deeper sense, we are in between time — the time of Jesus’ departure and the time when He will come again. We need to learn from the disciples how to wait.

Next Sunday, the Day of Pentecost, we will learn — and celebrate — what that power does in the Church and in our lives . . . and then we will, with great joy, begin to sing, “*Ain’t we got fun!*”

Amen.