

Time in Between

By
The Reverend Dr. Agnes Norfleet
From the Pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 93

¹ The Lord is king; he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed; he is girded with strength. He has established the world; it shall never be moved; ² Your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting. ³ The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring. ⁴ More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is the Lord! ⁵ Your decrees are very sure; holiness befits your house, O Lord, forevermore.

Acts 1:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach ² until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

³ After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴ While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for the promise of the Father.

“This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” ⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷ He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ 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.” ⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹ They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

As you know, in the Bible, the number forty signifies an important time of transition. Forty years represents the passing of a generation. Key figures for ancient Israel – Eli, Saul, the great King David and Solomon each are said to have ruled for forty years, meaning the full life cycle for a new generation to come of age. Forty can also represent a time of challenge or difficulty. Once freed from slavery in Egypt, God’s covenant community wandered forty years in the wilderness, a time which tested their faith and dependence on God. Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness between his baptism and public ministry, are described as the time when he was tested, and grew into his identity as the Son of God. Another fortieth day is when Eastertide ends with the Ascension of Jesus. Luke tells us that after Jesus was raised from the dead, there were a number of post-resurrection appearances, which assured the disciples that the new life God gives has meaning and purpose. After forty days the bodily, recognizable Jesus disappeared. He left.

Today’s reading for the Sunday after the Ascension seems timely for us to gather around this transitional text. For we at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church have entered a season of transition ourselves with the announcement of my coming retirement in the fall. Now, please understand Kirby and I were well trained by our preaching professor Welford Hobbie never to put our own selves in the place of Jesus in a sermon. Come the end of October, I will not be blasting off from the front lawn of the church and rise into the heavens, as much as I like the idea compared to the ten hour road trip that will lie before us. But we all know that my leave-taking does launch a new season for this congregation, a time of pastoral transition. And today, we mark a transition for the music ministry with Edward Landin Senn’s departure.

Gratefully, in these months we still have together, two new associate pastors will be installed - Andy Greenhow as Associate for Youth and their Families, and another highly qualified and experienced Associate for Congregational Care, whose name will be forthcoming in a few weeks. Their coming into these new roles as I am completing mine, means we, as a congregation, are in a liminal time. A time in between.

It is a season to which the Ascension of Jesus, as described by the Gospel writer Luke, speaks a helpful word. In our scripture reading from Acts, Jesus is surrounded by his disciples. Jesus blesses them with the promise that the Holy Spirit is on the way. He commissions them to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth, and then suddenly, the Risen Christ slips away for the last time. One moment he was there with them, talking to them in person. The next moment, his hand was raised in final blessing and good-bye, as their upturned glances squint after him, his feet wrapped in the clouds which carry him away. For the disciples on this fortieth day after Easter, when the visible Christ disappeared, the Ascension marks a major season of transition.

William Bridges, a former English professor turned consultant, has written extensively on navigating life's transitions. He describes how all of life is a series of transitions, and how each one has three primary similarities. People in transition experience first an ending, then a period of confusion and disorientation, which leads to a new beginning. No matter what the ending is - preschool, becoming an empty nester, graduation, the death of a loved one, retirement, a move, no matter what the ending is, there comes a time of uncertainty and disorientation before something new can begin. Bridges underlines the importance of learning not only how to cope with

the confusion of transitions – but also to accept it as a natural part of any major change. Being unsettled for a time in between is a necessary pathway into any new beginning.¹

You could say, this is a modern, psychological understanding of what all those seasons of forty years or forty days mean in the Bible.

For the disciples, with their heads arched back toward the heavens as Jesus vanished from their sight, they were left wondering: what on earth do we do now. They had come to believe in Jesus. They had seen how he did the work of God in the world. They had grown to trust in his powerful presence, and then he was gone. But in Lucan fashion, from the birth of Jesus to his resurrection, at the Ascension figures in white robes appear to reassure them. “This Jesus who was taken up into heaven,” they say, “will come again,” and during this time in between, remember what he just said: the Holy Spirit is coming to empower you. Not only had they believed in Jesus, the Ascension shows that Jesus also believed in them. They had matured enough to do his work without him, to be on their own for a while.

The Ascension is something like a graduation ceremony for the disciples, you see, and by extension it becomes a word of encouragement, a kind of a commencement for us as well. No matter what kind of transition we find ourselves in, we discover here that God will not leave us alone for long, but also that God believes in us to discern what to do. Jesus trusted the disciples enough to let them go, just as parents trust their children to grow toward a moment of leave-taking, just as you and I will trust one another

¹ William Bridges, *Making Sense of Life's Transitions*, p. 37.

to help navigate this congregation's upcoming pastoral transition. Because when those disciples stopped looking up at the sky where Jesus disappeared – what choice did they have, but to lower their gaze. To look into the faces of one another, to go forth in ministry together, to see the needs of the world and to address them with their own God-given gifts. God has enormous faith in us to find our way through any transitional time in between.

In May and June each year, I enjoy reading or listening to a hand full of college commencement speakers to hear what they have to say to the graduates. Of course, many of this year's graduations have reacted to the pressure the Trump Administration is putting on universities across the country, in response to the government taking away funds for research and threatening foreign students by revoking visas from some countries. This week the President of Harvard received a sustained ovation for standing up to the administration. At Wake Forest University, longtime CBS journalist, Scott Pelly gave an impassioned address about this nation's founding principle of Free Speech which is also under threat these days. Then there are other commencement addresses, at least as meaningful, that have not made the news.

One of them was delivered by Johns Hopkins University President, Ronald J. Daniels. He spoke to his graduates about navigating their transition, offering a word that resonates with the themes of Jesus' Ascension and this moment in our congregational life. Daniels began by acknowledging that "Endings are never easy. But in some respects, neither are beginnings." He talked about the challenges of college graduates entering the working world and highly competitive graduate or

professional programs. He gave voice to the common fears which all of us encounter at one time or another: fears of potential setbacks or failures, of disappointments or stumbles, and the inevitable question that transitional moments put before us: what do I do next?

Then he told a personal story. Earlier in the year, Daniels had participated in, or as he put it, “more accurately, subjected myself to” a three-day silent meditation retreat with thirty perfect strangers. His son, who is devoted to the practice of meditation, had encouraged him to explore its benefits, a practice the father admitted: “I am uniquely ill-suited for this endeavor, as I don’t think I’ve sat in silence for more than two minutes in my entire waking life.” Like any good academic he said he approached the retreat in a way he might face a dreaded advanced course in Cellular Biology or Thermodynamics. He downloaded an app and crammed for a few days before the retreat to prepare for his introduction to meditation. During the retreat, the instructor would take questions from the group. Nearly everyone confessed and spoke of how arduous it was to quiet one’s mind, to cease thinking about work, about family, about the presentation next week, or the forgotten dog food order. He said, “And to a person, each time these thoughts surfaced and disrupted their meditation, we all felt the same sense of failure, of being overwhelmed by what to do next, what to fix.

In response to these confessions of failure, our group’s leader would always offer the same, simple response: simply, “begin again.” What matters is not the failure behind you, but the prospect of success the next time you try. So, he urged us, “to begin again”. Daniels now admits - it may be a *very* long time before he will try another three-day silent retreat, however, that simple injunction, “to begin again,” has stuck with him.

Because, he said, to “begin again” does not imply your previous effort was wasted or that you must take drastic steps to change something. Nor does it mean that the goal you were pursuing is wrong or ill-conceived. Rather, to “begin again” is a simple call, an exhortation, to keep at it.

Daniels told those graduates, “To begin again is different than merely beginning. You can begin anything. But to begin again is a choice to keep going, to re-commit, to bring fresh energy and perspective to an endeavor that means something to you.”²

Keep going, recommit, bring fresh energy. That is what Jesus trusted the disciples to understand. The good news of Easter did not become an eternity of post-resurrection appearances. The Ascension offered a time in between Jesus’ leave-taking and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. A time of transition. A time for the disciples, and a time for us, to navigate some confusion or disorientation, in order to understand that God has faith in us to do the work of Christ in the world. And in this season of pastoral transition, God has faith in us to begin again, to keep going, to re-commit, and to bring fresh energy and perspective to what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ in and for the world.

AMEN.

² President Ronald J. Daniels, Johns Hopkins University, commencement speech, 2025