

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
I Am the Vine and You are the Branches
The Rev. Bethany Peerbolte
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Habakkuk 2:1-4, John 14:15-17, Acts 2:1-4

I want us to try something before I begin. Ready?

[Silence - Count to 20]

Great Job! I wonder what that was like for you? Waiting is hard. Waiting when you don't know what is coming next or how long you will be waiting is incredibly difficult. The Pentecost story largely depends on a time of waiting and yet we skip over that part every year. Heck, Acts basically skips over it too. Jesus tells the disciples he will send them the Holy Spirit; he ascends into heaven; the disciples get distracted trying to refill their committee of 12 people; and then boom, Spirit shows up.

It sounds like they all go down in one day. They got up that morning, had breakfast with Jesus and saw him ascend. Then over lunch, they decided who was going to take Judas' spot and by the afternoon they had the Spirit. The timeline though is more likely that they waited for about 10 days for the Spirit. Scholars get to this length of time based on secular historical writings. The science is thin so we can't know for sure, but the writings, some of them journals, talk about Jesus alongside descriptions of preparations for specific festivals. We know when Jewish and Roman festivals took place on a calendar so we can get a general idea of Jesus' timeline too. Rumors of the resurrection are tied in closely with talk about the Festival of the First Fruits, and the Spirit shows up on the Festival of Pentecost which are 50 days apart. Acts 1:3 says Jesus was on earth after his resurrection for 40 days, 50-40 = our 10 days of waiting for the Spirit.

Like I said, all that is a flimsy case BUT I think the most compelling support for the Spirit showing up after a period of significant waiting is the fact that Jesus does not just hand the baton off to the Spirit.

It seems odd that Jesus wouldn't make this important introduction himself if the Spirit was already nearly there. Like, "Hey guys, gotta go but I want you to meet this great friend of mine. We call her Spirit. She's gonna take over for me. See you in heaven. Peace out."

Quick detour to talk about why I use she/her pronouns for the Spirit. I know our English versions often use He pronouns when talking about the Spirit, but that was a choice translators made and I believe they chose wrong.

One, because there are two words that get translated into Spirit. One in Greek and one in Hebrew. The Hebrew word is "ruach" which is a feminine word. The Greek word is "Pneuma" which is gender neutral. SO anyplace in scripture that references the Spirit is either gender neutral or feminine and the only reason Greek speakers use "pneuma" is because that is the best word Greek speakers had to express the Hebrew understanding. They did not have a way to retain the feminine nature of the Spirit in their language. Much like we don't have a perfect way to talk about gender neutral people in English. There is already a translation and a loss of specificity happening from Hebrew to Greek speakers.

Secondly, in the Greek there is a pronoun that gets used around the word "pneuma" which is "autos." "Autos" can be translated as he, she, or it. When we make a translation of autos we need to look at who the word is

referring to. When translators see it connected to pneuma they hit a dead end. There is no gender on pneuma there is no gender on autos. What do we do? Until 2004 when English translators chose to write he, they could have just as correctly chosen she or it. Bibles translated in the last 17 years have started making different choices but it is a hard thing to switch.

Thirdly, I see God being perfectly fine with feminine roles in scripture. Even a literal reading of Genesis clearly shows female is part of God's image. PLUS there are tons of places in scripture that God is more than happy to be compared to female roles. Hens, bakers, breastfeeding, even Jesus says we must be born again in the Spirit, which is in Jesus' context the work of a woman. I think Jesus understood the Spirit to be more feminine and that's why he makes that metaphor about birth instead of using a metaphor connected to male work to describe the Spirit, for example, "one needs to be recarved in the Spirit." Jesus knew the Spirit well and when Jesus talks about the Spirit and uses autos I think Jesus means "she." So when I talk about the Spirit I use she/her pronouns.

There are lots of other reasons, but we need to get back to Pentecost and talk about waiting. Jesus does not choose to immediately pass the baton off to the Spirit. He ascends and forces the disciples into a period of waiting. We think this was about 10 days of not knowing when the Spirit would arrive, not knowing what it would look like for the Spirit to arrive, not knowing what would happen after that. They just had to wait.

The way you felt a few moments ago, as I slowly counted to 20, was probably similar to how the disciples felt waiting for the Spirit, and they had to endure it for 10 days. This forced waiting was an intentional choice that Jesus made. There must be something in waiting that Jesus wanted the disciples to experience first that made him choose to not make the introduction to the Spirit himself. Something that needed to be processed before they were ready for the Spirit to arrive.

While our little experiment at the beginning of this sermon gave us a reminder of what waiting is like, we know waiting better than we ever have. The past 14 months have been a crash course in waiting. The shared experience of waiting through this pandemic has given us a new understanding of the power in the wait and gives us an idea of what Jesus might have hoped would happen as the disciples waited for the Spirit.

The first thing we all did when we were forced to wait was dream. When we found ourselves with extra time, we dreamed about the possibilities. Posts about at home exercise were everywhere, we were dreaming of being healthier. People quickly found home projects they had always wanted to get to, they dreamed about unfulfilled potential. Hobbies were dusted off. We dreamed about who we wanted to be on the other side of the lockdown. We imagined coming out of the waiting a better version of ourselves.

For me that period of waiting lasted a month, maybe you did better than me, but the next stage was resting. What else did we have to do but rest. We vegged out on the couch watching whatever we could find on TV. Puzzles were suddenly sold out. Family conversations went long into the night. I even saw a video of a guy who spent all day doing whatever his dog did. When the dog looked out the window they looked out the window together. When the dog napped they napped. When the dog wanted to play they played. Resting while we waited for whatever was coming next took over our lives.

Then, and I believe largely where we are now, is analyzing. We first started analyzing how and why our lives had gotten to the place they were in February 2020. The packed schedules. The early mornings and late evenings. We looked at how normal had become normal and began asking should that be normal? Now as we

see a light growing with every vaccine in an arm, we are analyzing what to allow back into our lives. Thinking deeply about what we have learned over these months and how to shape a life that includes the things we miss and the new things we love. How do we hold space in our schedules for the lessons we learned during rest? How do we make the dreams we dreamed a reality?

These three things, dreaming, resting, and analyzing are the power in waiting. We rush through waiting because it's difficult, because it makes us uncomfortable. I'm sure many of you were on the edge trying to anticipate when I would begin my sermon, getting anxious and maybe a little annoyed. When we talk about Pentecost we rush past the waiting that came before the Spirit because it's not as exciting as flames hovering over someone's head. We thought nothing was happening while we waited. There isn't any story there. BUT there is.

There is so much in the wait. SO much that Jesus knew the disciples needed to wait before they were ready for the Spirit to arrive. While they waited they dreamed about how to get the message of Jesus out to the rest of the world. They dreamed about what a community fully committed to the teachings of Jesus would look like.

While the disciples waited, they rested. They no longer had to chase after Jesus and stay alert to the teachings. They could rest. And they could analyze the message. Really boil down the teachings to the core of what Jesus was saying. They probably retold their favorite parable, correcting one another, and had realizations about lessons they hadn't quite gotten when it was first told.

Dreaming, resting, and analyzing made them ready to get to work the minute the Spirit arrived. They had the vision of the dream. They were well rested and ready to get to work. They knew the lessons and how to proclaim the gospel.

I want to try our waiting again. This time I want you to feel yourself going through each stage. I will give you a verbal prompt of when to switch to the next phase. Ready

Let's dream: lean into the potentials we can only imagine (count of 10).

Rest: clear your mind, let your shoulders fall, unclench your jaw, relax your tongue (count to 10).

Analyze what lessons are within reach (count to 10).

Good job! This is just practice. We are still in the waiting period of this pandemic and so I challenge you to take the time to process through these stages of waiting. Do not rush through the gift of waiting and miss the power we can gain from it. So when this pandemic eases and life begins to spin again, we can be ready to live into the power that waiting has given us.