

Acts 1:1-11
Interlude
WRCoB 4.19.20

I spend a lot of time in my office staring out the window!

I appreciate being able to see out
At the picnic area and playground.

If you come in and see me doing it
You might wonder if I'm making best use of my time?"

I assure you I am.

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These past weeks of our lock down, I confess
I spend more time staring out the window at home.

I'm restless and I don't know how to preach.

Things have escalated so quickly
It's hard for me to get a spiritual handle on it.

But it reminds me of the comment found in today's passage.

After Jesus ascended into heaven
The disciples continued to look up into the heavens.

Two men dressed in white, angels we presume, ask
"Why do you stand there staring into the sky?"

Maybe like me, they wait for inspiration!

The Book of Acts is the second volume
Of two books written by Luke.

The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts
Are book one and book two of Luke's writings.

Here in the Book of Acts, Luke turns his attention
From the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus
To the beginnings of the Christian church.

The story in Acts is the story of the church
Expanding ever outward from Jerusalem
In increasing circles out to Rome.

Acts 1 is an interlude between Jesus' resurrection
And the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

It's like an intermission between scene 1 and 2
Halftime at a basketball game

A timeout to rest, restore, and prepare for
What follows in the second half.

During this interlude, Jesus instructs his disciples.

- He taught them about the Kingdom of God
- He told them to wait in Jerusalem
- He assured them he will be with them in the HS
- He taught they were not to know when he would return
- And that they were to be his witnesses.

If you continue to read through Acts
You will discover
That after the Holy Spirit empowered them
The church grew at an incredible rate!

Only now, they live in the interlude
The time between.

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There are interludes in our lives.

This pandemic is an interlude of sorts.

A time we wait.

A time when the wheels of progress come to a grinding halt
And forces us all to stop and reflect.

Waiting is not an easy exercise.
But it is necessary.

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The Bible speaks about waiting.

As in our Call to Worship
Waiting on the Lord is a spiritual discipline.

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There are interludes in the life of a congregation.

Times when after some changes
A church needs a time-out or an intermission.

A time when the church waits on the Lord.

A time to renew strength, vision, and purpose.

With this current pandemic

Our congregation enters an interlude in its life.

We, now, find we wait for the Lord.

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Our personal lives

Our corporate lives as a church

Our lives as Americans

And our lives as global citizens

Are in a state of flux.

Everything has changed.

Life as we knew it is no longer.

We have absolutely no idea how things will turn out.

I hear people talking about when this is over

And we go back to our normal lives.

I want to say it too.

But really, think about it.

Will we go back living as we did?

I doubt it.

There will be a new normal, a new reality.

Sort of like how people view 911
A pre-911 and a post-911 reality.

I'm afraid a return to "normal" is not to be.

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As a pastor, I wish I knew how God is using this moment.

But let's be sure.

God is present in this interlude.

I see positives things happening.

How the health care workers have stepped up
Has been incredible!

God bless all who work in the health care system.

During this lock down
I see families drawing closer
Of course, with some exceptions.

I see families walking together
Biking together
Eating together
And working together.

It has challenged us to be more intentional as a family.

I see how people have come together
Working for a common cause.

On an international level, I see a general recognition
Of our common humanity and common plight.

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When it comes to church, I see positives.

One of the positives is that through our online services
We have reached more people
Than if we had met in the sanctuary.

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A couple of examples . . .

I have a sister who is a non-church goer.

She texted me saying she watched the Palm Sunday service

She said it was nice because she dislikes going to church.

Online, she was able to watch it
Without dressing up, makeup, etc.

She watched it in her pajamas with a cup of coffee!

I have a friend who I've known since forever
Another non-church goer
Who also, not only watched a service
But shared it on his Face Book page.

He texted me on the Saturday before Easter
To ask whether I'd be posting an Easter service.

Our church's witness, note, not service
Has extended beyond the walls of our physical church.

The average viewings on all four online services
Is greater than our average worship attendance.

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There has been a gradual shift in this direction
Even before the Corona virus pandemic.

Research reveals evidence of what the Barna group calls

"worship shifting," the tendency to rely on digital spiritual tools (such as podcasts, streamed sermons, radio, etc.) instead of attending a church service at a set time and in person.

This shift, of course, has only increased
In response to the pandemic.

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On the negative side of all this
Most churches have seen a decrease in giving.

As with our congregation
We are not set up to handle online giving
And like others
We see a marked reduction in giving.

The biggest negativity I see
Is the absence of our weekly face-to-face contact
In corporate worship and social gathering.

The spiritual and emotional energy one experiences
When voices lift up our praise in song and prayer.

It is hard to feel the love online.

I miss the intimacy of our weekly physical gatherings
And I can't wait to come together again.

But when the restrictions lessen
Will it be "back to normal?"

Will we continue proper social distancing?
Be reluctant to shake a hand or hug?
Share in communion, fellowship meals
Or anointing services?

Will we wear masks when we come together?

Like you, I don't have the answers.

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What I am convinced of is that
Rather than looking only at the negative aspects
Of this interlude

We are to try to discern where God is moving.

How is God using this time for his good purposes?

One of my favorite Bible verses speaks of this.

Jeremiah 29:11-12 For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

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During this interlude we wait upon the Lord.

Now waiting means different things at different times.

Waiting for the Lord sometimes

Means staring out the window

A time of reflection and inspiration.

It sometimes means

Spending more time in prayer than usual

More time in reading God's word.

Waiting, we seek a vision from God.

But let's also be clear sometimes waiting is not idleness.

Going back to our passage today

We find the disciples staring up at the sky.

But we also find them actively engaged in ministry.

Waiting on the Lord, then, has two meanings:

1. Waiting for inspiration through prayer, reading God's word, and being sensitive to the leading of the Spirit. Staring out the window for inspiration fits this definition.

2. Secondly, the word wait is also defined as serving, i.e., like the term waiter who “waits” on tables. Writing the sermon whether you’re inspired or not fits this definition.

We will continue to be the church.

We not only wait on the Lord for inspiration and direction
We will continue to minister as we are able.

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How will the church emerge from this interlude?

I don’t know.

There may be less focus on church as a building or place
And more focus on church as people.

There may emerge more efficiency
In time, funds, and facilities.

What emerges might be smaller groups of people
Meeting in homes
With an occasional gathering in larger groups.

The power to witness and serve may change
From the outreach programs of the church
To individual church members.

The old way of doing church is changing
Much to the chagrin of old-schoolers like me.

A new kind of church will emerge.

And so, like the disciples in our passage today
Who stand in the interlude
Between Jesus' departure
And the arrival of the Holy Spirit

We wait on the Lord.

Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart (Ps 27:14).

[For] those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (Isa 40:31)

You know, it's all right to spend some time
Staring out your window!

It might just be a most productive enterprise!