

Waiting

Waiting is probably not likely to be on many folk's top ten list of favorite things to do. Sitting around talking, having conversations and not really doing much, well...we can all spend a fair amount of enjoyable time with that activity...but sitting around waiting on something to happen or for an appointment with someone...even if we can have a conversation with someone else while waiting...well...just the fact that we know that we are waiting changes the sense of pleasure about the activity. Waiting is just not something that we like to do. I subscribe to a commentary by Jill Duffield who edits the Presbyterian magazine Outlook. Her comments are her take on the lectionary readings and observations about how she has seen God working in the church and her life. Sometimes the theme she sees coincides with one I see, sometimes not. The theme she saw running through the texts this week was water—the river of life in Revelation, the pool of healing in the 5th chapter of John, and the river where Paul met Lydia which changed the course of his missionary journey. But there were two passages suggested from the gospel of John and on Thursday, the church calendar marks the Ascension of the Lord with some other suggested texts one of which is the text from Luke which I just read which describes that ascension and what Jesus said to the disciples who watched. After reading all these texts the theme which emerged for me was waiting...In the passage from the farewell address taken from John 14: 23-29 where we have a long discourse by Jesus trying to prepare the disciples for what is going to happen he says: "I have said these things to you while I am still with you." He also says, "You have heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' And also, "And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe." Quite frankly, if I had been in the room with those disciples, I am not sure if I would have understood what Jesus was trying to say. I might have been more likely to have been waiting for the other shoe to drop...for it to be made clear what he meant because these statements really didn't seem clear. And it really was the events of the passion and the resurrection that did do that for them, not the discourse. During this discourse he also explained a little more about how his coming to them would be through the Advocate, the Holy Spirit whom the Father would send when he went to the Father. This Advocate would be a teacher and a guide and would remind them of all that he had taught to them. In John 14 we hear Jesus prepare the disciple for the coming events; telling them they will have

a time of waiting while he will be gone...although they don't understand he tells them he will suffer and die and then rise again after three days. Easter morn they find the tomb empty but do not immediately understand, but begin to comprehend. The risen Christ spends time with them...forty days...and then he says to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled." Again and again, Jesus during those forty days continued to teach the disciples about the Messiah, his purpose and then he gave them a mission: "that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things." Up to this point, I wonder if the disciples thought that they had their leader and teacher back. They had waited the three days in fear, and now in joy, they were again learning from him. The waiting was behind them. Wrong. Remember in that discourse those words about an Advocate? It seems another waiting period is about to begin. Luke 24: 49-51—"And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high. Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven." The disciples went back into Jerusalem with great joy and spent time in the temple blessing God and worshiping and waiting for the arrival of what had been promised. We celebrate the arrival of the Advocate as Pentecost—so that wait was measured as about another ten days. These times of waiting, especially the first three days were certainly traumatic, but were not very long. And as some of the texts indicate, the expectation of the early believers was that Christ's promised return in glory would not be too far in the future. As a seminary professor phrased it, it was Thursday and Christ would be returning on Sunday so the gospel message it was urgent that the message be spread, no time to waste and no need to worry about families. Of course from the perspective of some two thousand years of waiting for the return of Christ--- does what Jesus said about no one knowing the hour except the Father place an entirely different timetable about how long that possible wait might be on God's timetable? Also, considering this theme of waiting within these passages we read as we celebrate Ascension Sunday what does the earlier text from John 5: 1-9 have to tell us about waiting for the movement of God? The most obvious thing that we read from this text is that it is a story about a healing done by Jesus relatively early in his ministry. We are not told by the narrator that this was a sign of Jesus' identity. The scene is just described as an occasion when Jesus as an

observant Jew went up to Jerusalem to celebrate a festival there. While there he passes this pool where there are many invalids. The pool described is a natural one near the Temple known for its healing properties. It was known to bubble now and then. This activity was thought to be associated with its ability to heal and led to a tradition that the first person to step into the waters would be healed. The basic scene is this there is Jesus who heals and invalids who need healing—but there is a pool where healing is occurring. What is different about this healing story? First, the one man who will be healed does not approach Jesus and ask to be healed; nor does he have a friend to present his case to Jesus. What we have been told about this man is this: “One man was there who had been ill for thirty eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, ‘Do you want to be made well?’” Jesus notices the man and seeks to aid him. Jesus could not walk past or ignore human suffering; he had to do something about it. The image portrayed here is a narrative portrait of a God of consummate compassion. The man who has waited by the pool but been unable to make his way to the water while it was bubbling is healed. When asked if he wanted to be made well, instead of answering yes, the man launches into complaints about what has been going on for the last 38 years—how he has no one to put him in the water and others always have gotten in front of him. Jesus has not asked him for a history of his plight, nor for reasons why he has not been able to take advantage of the healing pool. Jesus sees his need and he is healed...at once...the wait was over. What brought this man and the many other invalids--the blind, lame and paralyzed--to these five porticoes surrounding the pool was the hope they would be there when the waters of the pool bubbled. We are also waiting for the return of the Lord in glory, for the return which will bring an end to the brokenness of this world, to the coming of the image shown to John of Patmos just like those early believers. However, we no longer believe so strongly that the end is near, and so many have come to doubt. In fact, many I believe if asked by Jesus, “Do you want to be made well?” would answer like the man by the pool in John’s text with a list of complaints about the ills of their life. In doing this, we sometimes forget that we are not left alone. While we wait for the return in glory of our Lord, we do have the presence of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit with us to guide, to instruct, to comfort, to give hope...we just have to be mindful and open to that presence and listen. We need to remember to make our prayers conversations so that we can hear what that promised presence sent from the Father through the Son is telling us so that we

may be healed while we wait. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.