

“Is This the Time?”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

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Based upon Numbers 9:15-23; Acts 1:6-11

When the cloud first stopped, Asher was happy. His family had walked and walked for what seemed like forever. Hot and tired, the eight-year-old collapsed onto a blanket ready for a nap. “Don’t make yourself too comfortable,” his father Shimi warned him. “We move when the Lord tells us to move. This is probably only a short rest. Sleep with your sandals beside you and your bag packed. The Lord is taking us to the Promised Land. We won’t be here long.”

His father had been right; the next day the cloud was gone from the tabernacle, and they were on the move again. This pattern of a few days on, one day off continued for a while, but then something changed. The cloud remained over the tabernacle for a whole week. People started to get antsy. You can only live out of a bag, ready to run for so long before the tension starts to get to you.

“I’m bored,” Asher complained to his mother. “There is nothing to do here.”

“Hush,” his mother Tova told him. “Tomorrow morning you can help me gather the manna. Go play now.”

“I’m bored,” Asher complained to his father. “When are we going to get there?”

“Only the Lord knows,” his father answered. “But we trust that the Lord knows best.”

When the cloud had remained over the tabernacle for two weeks without moving, everyone decided, almost as if an order had been issued, that they might as well get some work done while they waited. The women set about darning clothing. The boys collected firewood. The girls plucked the feathers off of quail while the men planned how the Promised Land would be divided and governed.

After the one-month mark came and went, however, some of the people grew so restless they started a revolt. “‘Moses’ god’ has abandoned us here in the desert to die!” they shouted. “I am going back. At least there was meat in Egypt. Remember the cucumbers, melons, leeks, and garlic?” Others said, “Why go back to slavery? Let us go forward and find the Promised Land ourselves. It can’t be too hard to find.” Moses told the people to put their trust in the one who had saved them from Pharaoh, but many left the camp anyway, some heading north, others heading south. They never were seen again.

After two months had passed, a subtle shift happened in the community. People began to relax again and enjoy their days. Their routines were so established that they had time for their creativity to flourish. At night they gathered to dance and tell stories. During the day, they created art out of shrubbery and desert flowers. They took care of their animals, visited with neighbors, and celebrated the babies born to women who had been with child when they fled. They didn’t talk as much any more about what they thought the Promised Land would be like or about what slavery had been like.

After a year, the wilderness was the only home those babies, now almost toddlers, had ever known. Even though he was older, Asher himself could barely remember what life had been like in Egypt; nor did he remember the fear and the urgency of the first part of their journey in the wilderness. He just got up each day, “Hello purple flower; hello black beetle; hello hot sun.” He did his chores and played with his friends and waited to see what the day would reveal to him. The wilderness was his whole world. The cloud had always been over the tabernacle. The days of the week were almost indistinguishable; only worship marked the weeks. So, when Asher woke up one morning and the cloud was gone from the tabernacle, and the trumpets blew announcing it was time to move again, he didn’t know what to feel. He was sad to leave their wilderness home. He was nervous about what lay ahead on the journey. He was excited at the thought that they would be moving closer to the Promised Land. “Why are we going now?” he asked his father. “The Lord’s timing is a mystery to us,” his father answered, “but the Almighty’s faithfulness is steadfast. Keep your eyes on the cloud and remember that the one who rescued us from slavery in Egypt is with us. The Lord will enable us to get to where we need to go, when it is time for us to get there.”

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I hope you don’t mind my indulging in this little bit of modern Midrash just now with this story, but when I read *Numbers* 9:22, which says, “Whether it was two days, or a month, or a year, that the cloud continued over the tabernacle, resting upon it, the Israelites would remain in camp and would not set out; but when it lifted they would set out,” I was struck by the sheer volume of what these words leave out. There is a big difference between a two-day wait and a year-long wait. Imagine what the people went through having to live in limbo in the wilderness for that long! We are used to thinking of the Hebrew slaves wandering in the wilderness for forty years, which you might remember is Bible-speak for a very, very long time. But what we forget sometimes is that they did not spend all of that time steadily moving forward. They spent a great deal of that time camped out here or there, waiting for the clouds to lift off the tabernacle. That was their signal that it was safe to move forward, that God had another chapter in store for them.

In our New Testament story, which takes place more than a thousand years after the Exodus, the disciples still had their eyes on the clouds and were still waiting for the Promised Land of their dreams. The risen Christ had been with them for forty days following the Resurrection. Forty days isn’t as long as forty years, but it was still long enough to make the disciples antsy. When Jesus was crucified their dreams of his liberating Israel and creating the Kingdom of God on earth were crushed. Then when he rose, their dreams were resurrected with him. “Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” the disciples asked Jesus, like children on a road trip asking, “Are we there yet?” But Jesus wasn’t interested in playing that game. “It’s not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority,” he said. “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.” Then he disappeared into the clouds. The disciples were so stunned, they just stood there looking at the clouds until angels came to prod them to close their mouth and return their gaze to earth. There was work to be done.

What can these stories teach us about the waiting period that now torments us all? “Is this the time we can resume our lives?” we ask. “How long will we have to wait for these dark clouds to go away?” “When will it be safe to gather together again?” It’s no secret that “quarantine fatigue” is setting in in our country and around the globe. If you haven’t yet felt it in your own mind, body, or spirit there are plenty of people who have. You can see it in the faces of the people protesting the lock downs with a desperation so fierce that it feels threatening, and in the growing numbers of those simply ignoring the rules to gather or shop or do what they please. We don’t like being stuck in this wilderness where food is both scarce and yet also having to be plowed under and destroyed because it can’t be processed. The economy is a mess, we are separated from loved ones in painful ways, and the mental health of many is increasingly threatened by anxiety and depression. It’s hard to wait in limbo in a place that feels so far from how we dream the world should be. When I think that it was only just this past February when my son and I went on vacation to Disney—it feels like a long, long time ago in a galaxy far away—I can hardly believe it. We wanted to go on a ride, but when we found out the wait was almost two hours, we said, “Oh well, forget that! We’re not going to wait for two whole hours!” Funny isn’t it, how relative our understanding of time is? Now after two months of quarantine, if someone told you everything could go back to normal in just two hours, wouldn’t you be thrilled?

But here’s the problem: even if you hear people saying we can and should go back to normal, the science doesn’t support it. Normal isn’t two hours away; it may be as much as two years away. The virus is still very much a threat. There won’t be a vaccine for ages, and right now the only weapon we have that is effective against it is physical distancing. If we stop practicing that, people will get sick and die. Lots of people. The virus doesn’t care about our rights and freedoms, our boredom, or our bank accounts. If we put these things before everything else, we risk not only our lives, but the lives of the most vulnerable, lives that our faith teaches us matter just as much as our own. So, instead of asking, “Is this the time?” every morning and then getting frustrated when the answer is “No,” for everyone’s sake we would do far better to ask ourselves “What shall I do with this time today?” or better yet, to try to see the time we’ve been given in a whole new way.

I’ve preached before about the two concepts of time in the Bible: *Chronos* and *Kairos*. Chronos is clock time and calendar time—the kind we can schedule and measure. Kairos is God’s time, which in many ways doesn’t feel like time at all because when we are dwelling in Kairos, chronos becomes irrelevant. When you are gazing in the eyes of your newborn and time stands still, that’s kairos. When you are lost in wonder on a walk in the beauty of creation, or doing a project that you love, that’s kairos. Kairos doesn’t deplete like chronos does, it refreshes; kairos doesn’t demand like chronos does, it teaches. Kairos brings us closer to God.

Most of us are so enslaved to chronos that we don’t experience much kairos in our daily lives. “We’re too busy,” we say, and for some people even in quarantine this is still true. For healthcare workers, there isn’t enough time for a bathroom break let alone rest and refreshment these days. For parents who are trying to entertain toddlers or home school children while working, there is less time now than there ever was. But for many others, especially those who are quarantined alone, the problem isn’t too little time, it’s too much. Each day feels like a

month. That tells us that it isn't just busyness that keeps us from dwelling with God in kairos, it's the way that we see time. We see it as something that controls us, instead of as a gift for us.

After years of being enslaved to Pharaoh's brick-making quotas, the Hebrews were the same way. That's one of the reasons God gave them time in the wilderness to do nothing. They needed to learn that their God wasn't going to measure their value by the number of seconds they worked or the number of bricks they made. They needed to learn that God valued relationships more than efficiency, and personal growth more than productivity. Most of all, they needed to learn who God freed them and claimed them to be— a different kind of people who trusted in the providence of God, and lived in an economy designed to foster wholeness and community with grace. So, God gave them lots of chronos to free them to discover kairos. God gave them time to learn to trust and to see themselves in a new way because God knew that if they went straight from working for Pharaoh, to working to get rich in the Promised Land, they would never become a new people. They would just be their old selves in a new place.

The disciples also needed to learn about the new way that Christ was offering them because their dream of where Jesus was leading them and his dream were different. They were focused on him becoming king and getting rid of the Romans; he was focused on changing the world. Instead of giving them a time certain when their dream would come true, therefore, he invited them to step into that dream in the present by becoming his ambassadors. He reminded them that God's timing was different from their own, so instead of asking "When?" they would do better to ask, "What can we do with and for God now?"

Now we are the ones waiting. I am not saying that God has caused this virus or this period of waiting to teach us a lesson. Our loving God doesn't inflict natural disasters to home-school us. But God can work through even the worst circumstances to enable us to learn and grow. So, one of the questions God asks us through today's texts is "Are we open to learning during this waiting time?" Now is the time for us all to learn how to "be," instead of to "do," and how to contemplate instead of to control. Who are we apart from what we produce? What would we value most if time was no obstacle? Now is the time for us to learn about gratitude, self-sacrifice, and long-term thinking. The more we think of the time as a gift and not a burden, the more we will find kairos in the wait, and the more we use this time to discover divinely-inspired insights about ourselves, our world, and God, the faster we will find our way to a world that looks more like the Promised Land and less like a prison.

There is a Japanese story which explains this well. A young man wanted to be the greatest martial artist in the land. So, he traveled very far to find the best instructor. "I want to be the best martial artist in the country," he said. "How long must I study?" "Ten years," the master said. "Ten years!" That seemed far too long to the man. So, he asked, "What if I studied twice as hard, then how long would it take?" "Twenty years," the master replied. "What? That's even longer," the man thought. "What if I practiced day and night? Then how long?" "Thirty years." Frustrated, the man said to the master, "How is it that each time I say I will work harder, you tell me that it will take longer?" The master responded, "The answer is simple. With one eye focused on your destination, there is only one eye left with which to find the way."¹

¹ Wendt, Fritz, "The Politics of Faithful Waiting- Acts 1:6-14," Political Theology Network, May 22, 2017; retrieved May 4,

The secret to dwelling in kairos instead of chronos and finding the peace of God in the process is to give two-eyes' worth of attention to the now, instead of dividing our attention between now and the "then" of our dreams. God is with us in the now and will remain with us whether the wait is two days, two months, or two years. As Jesus invited his disciples, so Jesus now invites us to step "beyond the anxiety of not knowing what is next," as one commentator put it, "into the divinely established purpose of life in the meantime."² I really like that. There are abundant blessings waiting for all of us in this "life in the meantime." There are lessons to be learned about love and trust, help and hope, priorities, and patience. Do not be in such a hurry to move forward that you miss the gifts in this time or run out into a wilderness that isn't safe. We may be stuck where we don't want to be right now, but God is here with us, and will help us to find the way to a future with hope when the time is right. Amen.

2020 from <https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-faithful-waiting-acts-16-14-fritz-wendt/>

² White, Sean A., Theological Perspective on Acts 1:6-14, [Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary](#) Year A, Vol. 2, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 520.