

Homily for May 16, 2010 (Ascension of the Lord*, C)
Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47 (v.v.); Ephesians 1:17-23; Luke 24:46-53

“Stay and Wait”

I’m not very good at waiting. Like most Americans who came of age with the advent of the microwave oven and personal computer, I’ve become accustomed to getting stuff done within a finite amount of time. Doing my morning workout? 45 minutes (including stretching). Shave head and face and shower? 10 minutes. Pour and eat a bowl of cereal for breakfast? 5 minutes.

You can imagine, then, the frustration that I and over 250 fellow Detroit-bound passengers felt at the airport in Amsterdam last Sunday as it was announced that our flight was going to be delayed for hours. The cause, of course, was the roving ash cloud from the Eyjafjallajokull volcano in Iceland, along with its colicky little brother. It’s bad enough to be held up by something you can’t control, but it’s even worse when it’s also something you can’t pronounce!

I had to count my blessings, however. The delay and subsequent longer route added less than three hours to our arrival time in Detroit; and unlike many others I didn’t have to worry about a missed connecting flight. Still, the experience reminded me of the importance of learning not only how to wait but how to wait *well*, to not just “grin and bear it” but to even find grace in waiting.

In our gospel reading from Luke 24 on this Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord (celebrated on the 7th Sunday of Easter in all but a handful of dioceses in the U.S.), Jesus addresses his disciples before finally leaving them physically:

*“And behold I am sending the promise of my Father upon you;
but stay in the city
until you are clothed with power from on high” (v. 49b).*

“Volume II” of St. Luke’s work, the Acts of the Apostles, picks up where his gospel left off, at the same Ascension event:

*While meeting with them,
he [Jesus] enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem,
but to wait for “the promise of the Father
about which you have heard me speak;
for John baptize with water,
but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (1:4-5).*

Stay. Wait. Those are tough words for most of us to hear, and they must have been even tougher for the disciples, who seen the risen Lord and received his commission and promise:

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you,
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,*

*throughout Judea and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).*

In a recent reflection shared at a gathering of the leaders of women’s religious orders in Rome, Religious Sister of the Cenacle Judette Galares used the example of a later follower of Christ, Lydia (see Acts 16:13-15, 40), to invite them to immerse themselves more fully in the process of conversion to which all of us need to submit if we would be more effective disciples and witnesses of the Lord.

Sr. Judette described five phases in that process: (1) an experience of spiritual darkness, confusion, emptiness or thirst; (2) an awakening to God’s word and action in our lives; (3) an inspired response to that awakening; (4) a period of rest and reflection; and (5) integration of what we have experienced. She then highlighted the critical need to heed the call to stay and wait in contemplation:

The period of silence and withdrawal has provided the time to make sense of what has happened, to integrate the change of attitude, perspective and belief into one’s history and life, and to form a synthesis of all the parts of the mystical and prophetic experience of conversion.

That’s what the apostles needed. In a matter of weeks, they had experienced the trauma, dashed hopes and loss of Jesus’ crucifixion and death; the confusion, disbelief, amazement and joy of his resurrection; and the challenge, glory and power of his ascension. They needed time to make sense of it all and to weave what they had seen and heard into the mission that he had given them. Pentecost and the Holy Spirit would come, but they could not be rushed.

In his beautiful prayer for the church in Ephesus, St. Paul asked that God would bless them with “a Spirit of wisdom and revelation resulting in knowledge of him,” along with enlightenment, hope, and “the riches of glory in his inheritance among the holy ones.” Such gifts do not normally come to us at once. They are the byproducts of living and loving, succeeding and failing, action...and rest.

The Eucharist itself mirrors this process. Just as it is sometimes called a “dress rehearsal for the kingdom,” it is also a dress rehearsal for life outside the walls of the church. Words and actions, songs and prayers—the “bricks” of the liturgy—are held together by the mortar of silence and rest. Page through a missalette some time in the coming week and notice how many times the assembly is called to silence: before the priest’s prayers; between the readings in the Liturgy of the Word; after communion; and elsewhere.

When the seed of God’s word is planted, we need time to make it grow. When the gift of Christ’s body and blood are given to us, we need time to digest their significance.

Today we enter the last week of the Easter season. As we prepare for Pentecost, may we celebrate the many ways in which the promised gift of the Holy Spirit is still moving in God’s people—in word, in deed...and in waiting. +