

“Not When but Where”
By Rev. Ridgley Joyner
Acts 1:1-11 & Luke 24:44-53
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When we moved to Conshohocken, I took to taking walks around the borough. I loved seeing all the different homes and the community each block had with one another. It’s even more fun now to see all the pictures in the windows, chalk outside, the kids playing ball in the street. Our town has come alive in a new way.

On one of my walks last April I discovered the Conshohocken Community Garden- a piece of land nestled between row homes and businesses with 30 plots. The picnic tables were painted with love, folks gathered there for “Happy Hours” and Potlucks, residents walked by with their dogs, picked up free herb clippings, and tossed their donations in the compost bin built by a local restaurant filled with sticks, grass clippings, rich hops from the brewery down the street. I was INSTANTLY hooked.

I looked it up online only to find that there was a long waitlist. This little slice of heaven was highly coveted in the borough where it seems every space has a purpose. I joined the list. And waited, and waited and waited. It was becoming increasingly obvious that I would not get a plot that summer. So I bought some pots and gave thanks for my sunny balcony, however tiny it was.

Three weeks ago, on the day before my birthday, I received one of the best birthday gifts: An email with a little leaf emoji in the subject line: Community Garden Plot Available. As you can imagine I IMMEDIATELY paid my membership fee and rejoiced for my waiting was over (at least I thought). Now many of you know that when I moved here I shared my favorite hobby to be gardening. For 3 years I have been waiting for a chance to have something like this: a 10x10 garden plot with full sun that was something I could call mine. Not pots on a porch, or mesh gardening bags to be moved—a place I could take my shoes off, feel the dirt between my feet, greet worms as I pulled weeds and with a little work and a lot of patience watch God’s creation grow before my eyes.

I have since realized just how spoiled I was in Charleston the land of endless summer with my copiously sunny yard full of pollinators, flowers and herbs I had never met before I decided to make them a part of our abode. I spent every second I could nurturing, learning and growing things in Charleston. I didn’t realize how much I had been waiting for this moment until I got that email with the leaf emoji.

I thought my waiting was over, until my birthday which so generously shared record lows and frosty temps. Suddenly I was impatiently checking the weather, looking for just the right time to plant seedlings, or seeds? Can I plant seeds? What’s my zone? Am I too late? Will they germinate? How on earth do I acquire supplies for a garden without going to the store? How do I maximize my space? What to plant where? I was drowning in joyous research and planning, feeling behind.

So now, 2 weeks later I have a fully planted garden with the best soil full of nutrients, some seeds waiting to greet the world above ground, seedlings that will hopefully survive and climb a trellis built for 7,000 pickles thanks to Jim Ryland and Will.

Even though I feel like I've really gotten somewhere, my waiting isn't nearly over. I started to think about why I love this so much this week. In some ways, I'm in it for the food, the end result—snapping that green bean in half on a warm summer night while prepping veggies for dinner. But I'm mostly in it for the process—just how much there is to learn. The uncertainty of it all is daunting for sure, but it teaches me so much. For all I know there could be another frost, a treacherous summer or an infestation of who knows what and I'll have to think of a creative solution to help my plants thrive. We spend a lot of time prepare for what might come, but most of it in gardening is rolling with the punches, making small changes as we go along, nurturing the plants, and taking joy in spending time among the growing. For me, it's the process. It's the patience it teaches me, the humility it inevitably provides, and the waiting. So we shall see if and how and when my plants decide to bear fruit. Gripping content here, I know.

I wonder...What are you waiting on in this season? Perhaps you too are making your yard and home ready for a summer outside with family. Perhaps you are waiting for a baby to grow in your womb. Waiting for test results? Doctors appointments? Waiting to hear from your college on what happens next year? Perhaps you are waiting, wondering how or if your job will work in this new normal. Are you waiting on God to speak into your life right now in a particular way?

I suspect we are all waiting on the day we won't have to click a link to see the ones we love, especially our church family. I have found a profound solidarity with God's people in scripture in this time—

God's people are a people in waiting—

Sarah waiting for a baby, Israelites waiting in the wilderness, Exiles waiting on a messiah, and even the disciples waiting on the Holy Spirit after Jesus ascended.

What we see by reading these people's stories is that being in waiting can be scary—I couldn't help but notice in our scripture reading today that Jesus waits to give them the Holy Spirit—how nerve wracking! How isolating! How terrifying!

Waiting can be scary and it can put our minds in places we don't want—where we start to yearn so much for “normalcy” that we will do anything to have it again—we yearn for comfort for ease. We can find ourselves like God's people in the wilderness thirsting for something, hungering for what was-- suddenly the past is the glory days despite all of its shortfalls—I mean, recall the quote from the Israelites in the wilderness- “ah, slavery those were the days. We at least knew we had food on our plate at the end of the day” Suddenly what was seems to be what we crave because it was predictable—but not this. This isn't predictable. Waiting is uncomfortable and scary.

We are the lucky ones that get to know the story. We say to the disciples on the Mount of Olives, “Yes, waiting for the Holy Spirit must have been scary, but it will come soon on Pentecost”. We quickly read over Martha weeping at Lazarus’s bedside, because we know Jesus will bring him back to life. We say to Sarah “Keep waiting, listen to God, your son is coming”. We whisper to the bereaved disciples on Holy Saturday (he is risen!)

Our disposition as people of the sacred book rather than people in the sacred book affords us this predictability in the relationship with God. We value finding all the important facts of a scenario and making informed decisions. We anticipate what our futures will be with plans. And then things change. Because waiting, isn’t about what our vision will play out. Waiting is about focusing on a god who says to us, “It is not your place to know the times or the seasons of our Father—”

This Sunday celebrates the ascension of Jesus back to the Father. We find ourselves at the very event that ends Luke and begins Acts. Such an event marks both the end of one season of waiting and the beginning of another. Jesus has employed manyyy teaching to the disciples, through word, through example, through literally taking on flesh and living life with them. He tells them what is next—they will receive the Holy Spirit- it is God with them—he will not leave them, he will be with them, but in a new way—a way they hadn’t imagined yet.

And they were to get to work—sharing the Gospel. Their immediate question is about time, anticipating the future—the disciples want to know if now is the time that their kingdom will be restored. Will God bless them so they can once again be the “top dog” nation? Will God restore to them what was now that all this has happened? This has been a wild ride. Can the normalcy come back and then some?

Waiting is scary and uncomfortable, but waiting can also be formative.

“It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Jesus’s answer shows us that God is a God who is omnipotent, and he will be who he will be. God is the I AM who guides us and redirects us when our focus is on what we think God wants for us. In our meager attempt to assume what or when God might have something in store for us, he lovingly redirects us to the task at hand. Not when. But what. But how. And now. The disciples ask Jesus about the timing of God’s restoring the kingdom and he says--- you need to get to work! You will be my witnesses and not just where you think! In Jerusalem, but to Judea, and Samaria and the ends of the earth!

As people of the sacred book we know that the people in the book have no idea at that time just how much God has in store. They have no idea what will come on the day of Pentecost, they have no idea there will be opportunities to witness to God's amazing love to the prison guards, the Gentiles, the global south—as post Christendom people, we know that God's witnessing was and is much much bigger than just restoring the kingdom of Israel they knew.

It is easy in our season of waiting to want it to end—to get “back to normal” and want to anticipate what is next. But God redirects us to focus on the task at hand—and our role is not to focus on the when but the what—that God has called us right here and right now to be God's witnesses—to share God's everlasting and resilient love that can even unite a congregation miles and miles apart. God's everlasting and resilient love that builds bridges between Jews and Gentiles. God's everlasting and resilient love that is bigger than all of this—even bigger than we can fathom. And we must get to work with the tools God has given us.

Waiting is uncomfortable, waiting is scary, but waiting can be a time for great creativity.

Making the videos in this season has been an honor because I have witnessed something beautiful. I have witnessed us as a community discovering a new way to worship God. We have been able to allow families separated by states worship for Easter together for the first time in years. We have been able to give people a chance to experience the spirit of God at work at St. John's beyond our beautiful red sanctuary doors. We have been able to include Oliver in what would have been and is his senior Youth Sunday service. We have been able to watch Darien glorify God and make a work of art in 3 minutes! To rediscover the reflective gift of the sanctuary stained glass windows. To worship and celebrate communion as a family. To evangelize our pets! To reconnect homebound members to their church family oncemore. To listen to Iris tickle the ivories while watching cherry trees bloom at longwood gardens. To be welcomed to worship by the Ecks in MONTANA or the Markles in MINNESOTA. To experience Patrick's daily schedule and homelife! Last Sunday was the first time in a long time that our high schoolers were all together at youth group. Since March, I've spent more time in regular bible study and prayer with you all since I got here! Friends, God is at work in this season of waiting and it is blowing my mind!

I admit that the hardest part of this passage for me this week was the end. The end, when Jesus left, the disciples were together, we read of the bread they broke, the community they shared, and the support they were able to have in one another physically. We all so deeply want to be together in this time and while we know why we can't, that doesn't change that what we yearn for is a chance to run through the halls playing Grog at youth group, a chance to see a smiling face handing us coffee and a sweet treat after worship, a chance to sew with our friends and share a story or two, even a chance to sit in a business meeting in the Kean Room. That's our normal. That's where we are so used to seeing and knowing with conviction God's resilient and everlasting love for us. And while we have technology it can be wearying. The waiting can be scary and uncomfortable and downright annoying.

God calls us to patience, to trust and redirects us to share the gospel that Jesus came to us to show—that community is about being together physically, but that means nothing if we aren't seeking to love one another, to care for the sick, elderly, the vulnerable. To welcome all as Christ welcomes us into the fold.

We want to be together physically, and that's a GOOD thing! God gives us the spirit so that we might know we are never alone. God gives us the spirit to give us the strength to keep waiting, to trust that God has even bigger plans to make this awful situation a chance to witness to God's everlasting and resilient love.

God gives us the spirit to discern wisely how to best love one another, even if our instincts might lead us to rush back to what we know is comfortable.

Let us not find ourselves staring up toward the sky looking for God—for that is not the only place God dwells. He dwells among us in the world however distanced it might be right now. God love is among us- let's get to work sharing it with the world.