

Sacred Pause
Preached May 17, 2026
Acts 1:6-14
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In two weeks I will celebrate 9 wonderful years of serving as a pastor at St. John's. Nine years ago I had no idea I would be where I am today, and I'm sure some of you can relate to that.

Despite having family up here and visiting the jersey shore in the summers, I still had to transition to a different way of life here in PA. Things are more fast paced, ministry looks *very* different. Living here has challenged preconceptions I had formed growing up in the south. And I am so much better for it.

One thing I had to adjust to was the change in climate, but especially how that affected gardening. Turns out I was an *expert* in only one garden zone. When I moved up here, I had to shift from what I thought I knew and learn from others around me and their experiences, including some of you! It still happens every year though-- I always feel behind when I am not putting seedlings in the ground in March. The fact that I have to wait until MOTHER'S DAY every year to plant my seedlings is...a challenge.

When it came to my summer vegetable garden, I discovered quickly I was operating on my own internal schedule of what I knew about gardening in the past, not paying attention to what was all around me: the Spring chill and the *slow* return of summer in Pennsylvania. There is no spring chill in South Carolina. We go from freezing to blazing.

At first, the month of April in Pennsylvania required a special type of patience for me. Rather than taking a pause and enjoying the blooming tulips, budding cherry blossoms and resting, I was always doing any work I could to prepare for the next season, *counting down the days* to putting seedlings in the ground almost *willing a new season*. Stopping by the plant stores way too early asking, Is now the time? Can I get vegetables yet? The employees always laughed at me. "too soon, come back in a month".

I've learned over the years that you can't rush the season you are in, no matter how many warm days in April we have, rushing to put a tomato seedling in chilly soil is bound to be a recipe for disaster. I've really had to set aside my preconceived notions around gardening and move from *knower* to *learner*. The pause Spring gives us is just as important as the Summer that brings us juicy red tomatoes.

It turns out, it's not just me. People in general don't like to sit in "in between" seasons, regardless of what it can teach them. We as a society like to get to it! We are a "this meeting could be an email" culture. We binge watch TV because we can't bear to wait for a weekly release, we pay for Amazon memberships to get things delivered overnight. This is even reflective in our decision making. We value gathering information, but only if it helps us find a solution quickly and move forward. Efficiency is our Achilles heel. Sitting in the ambiguity of an in between time is considered lazy, not productive, or just plain treading water. We don't have time for any sort of pause. We simply don't have time.

Some of you may know that last week I completed an Executive Leadership program and the coursework incorporated a class on design thinking. At its core it is a way to approach complex challenges by not rushing toward answers, but by understanding people, questioning assumptions about the current reality, and making ideas tangible.

As a part of this class, we took an assessment that explored patterns in how we approach complex situations to help identify strengths and growing edges. The assessment measured people in 5 skill areas: opportunity seeking skills, relationship skills, scientific reasoning skills, presencing skills, and reflection skills.

Collectively our results were interesting: out of 50 pastors in the room-scored the highest in relationship skills. Surprised? Yea, me neither.

Where we *all* scored the *lowest* was in reflection skills—but it wasn't just us—the teacher told us that out of the thousands of people who take this assessment most score lowest in this skill.

When people face complex situations, they don't want to sit in the messy middle where there is ambiguity. The messy middle requires pause. The messy middle requires reflection and curiosity.

It is so hard to wait in in-between spaces. Especially if you have an assumption of what should come next. So when we find ourselves in the messy middle it can feel disorienting. Our brains are wired for the “known” tasks, routines and events in our lives. While in between times can feel uncomfortable, we can use it to pause and shift from what we *know* to what we can *learn*.

So why am I talking about all of this? Well I'm glad you asked!

This time between ascension and Pentecost leaves us in an “in between” space liturgically. Easter has ended, Christ has ascended into heaven, and the Holy Spirit has not yet arrived for the disciples. It is a very ambiguous time.

The Ascension story, as strange as it seems, is filled with so much wonder and mystery, almost as much as Christ's resurrection. The resurrected Christ has been among the disciples for forty more days after that Easter morning. He's appeared to them, taught them, walked them through their disbelief. And now, he is leaving them again. He's assured them that an advocate *will come*, and when it does, they will be God's witnesses to the ends of the earth. In the meantime, they must *wait* in Jerusalem.

Our scripture reading begins with the disciples asking Jesus a question—one might say this question is a leading question filled with their own expectations for what they hope to happen next.

The disciples ask Jesus “*Is now the time that you are going to restore the kingdom of Israel?*” They wanted so badly for the return of what they knew to be good and successful. They think that is the dream that Jesus is going to bring into fruition.

He says to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 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.”

What they don't realize is that Jesus is inviting them to participate in something so much bigger than just restoring what they knew. Jesus calls them out of their nostalgia and invites them to walk in the unknown, trusting God on their way.

Then, Luke (the writer of Acts) tells us that Jesus arose up into the heavens and he was hidden from their sight.

They return to an upper room, together, joyful, but also likely processing a collective grief—loss of their friend and uncertainty to what's next. The life they knew before Christ is no more, they are a changed people. The way they understood the world to work has been put to death and Christ is ushering in a new way of being in the world. They're in the messy middle and all of this takes a lot of courage.

Jesus tells the disciples to wait until the power of the Holy Spirit descends upon them, and it is then that they will become witnesses to God's great love, sharing the good news to the ends of the earth. This is more than just a kingdom being restored—God's kingdom will be for ALL.

Jesus tells them to wait, and the first thing they do is get to work. They're uncomfortable in this in between time so they do what they think is best—they decide to replace Judas by casting lots for a new disciple. They elect Matthias as the 12th disciple. I wonder if it was what God wanted for them—to have 12 disciples—or if it was just them doing what they thought was best because it was what they had always done.

This season between ascension and Pentecost invites us to pause and sit in ambiguity. To reflect on things that we hold tightly to, that we might need to let go of. To set aside the past things that worked before, to resist jumping to conclusions, to be open to discovery.

In between time can be scary, and uncomfortable but it can *also* be fruitful. It can be a time for gathering together in community, to pray, to listen for God and discern God's direction, to ask questions about where we are or the problems that we face, to be curious and practice wonder. To be willing to be wrong. To be on the watch for God in our midst. God calls us to take a beat. To pause. To wait. To let the season you are in teach you something. To sit in the discomfort of it all and allowing peace to reign in the midst of it. And God calls that Holy work too, sometimes even more important than the doing. For it is there we may hear God's voice the clearest.

Earlier in the sermon, I shared about just how hard it is for me every year to wait for Mother's Day to plant my seedlings. And you better believe that the first thing I did after church last Sunday was to head to the garden.

But this year, instead of impatiently counting down the days until my summer garden, I took a different route—I focused on the season I was in for a change. This fall, I closed down my garden earlier than I usually do—and a couple weeks before the first frost. I scattered seeds far and wide of winter rye, clover. The cover crop grew quickly, and even survived our two weeks of snow. By early March, the entire garden plot was full of grass up to my knees. All winter long, it provided a safe haven for soil microbes, pulling nitrogen from the air into the soil to act as a natural fertilizer. Instead of having dry cracked soil this March, I had a lush garden. After we cut the crops back, the clippings on top the soil acted as a layer of straw to suppress the weeds. Then we covered the straw with a layer of compost—full of things discarded thrown away, let go. Together those things brought about rich nutrient dense compost that helps bring about new life this growing season.

So I don't know what lies ahead of me and my garden come June, but what I do know is that sometimes focusing on the soil can be the best thing we can do. Rather than focusing on the fruits, what we can produce, or our desired outcome, God calls us to seasons of tending, nourishing, and curiosity.

I invite you to join me this week—even just for a day—to practice spend time doing that very thing. Approaching a hard conversation with curiosity, putting yourself in someone else's shoes, second guessing the things you are most sure about. Listening before speaking, reminding yourself that everyone you meet is a beloved child of God who has the light of God in them.

Join me in listening for God, praying for those you love and those you find hard to love. To thinking about what God might be asking you to set aside—whether it is a project, a way of thinking, an opinion you are sure about, or a harmful relationship.

—knowing that letting go may mean you are ushered into a season where you may not have all of the answers, but you can wonder in the presence of God for all the ways that God is at work expanding our dreams, right before us.

This too, is the work, my friends, for God will bring about God's fruits in due time.