

The Cost of Worship
Left Behind
Ascension Sunday
Sermon by Rev. Andrew Packman
Bethlehem Lutheran Church, St. Charles
June 2, 2019

Many of you know that Sarah and I met in Hyde Park when we were both in our first year of seminary. We ran into each other for the first time on the corner of 57th Street and University Avenue. She was walking with a group of friends on their way to lunch and I was walking back from my Biblical Hebrew Class. I happened to know some of those friends she was with, so I flagged them down – ostensibly to greet those friends but, of course, in reality because I hoped that they would kindly introduce me to this woman who, a mere four years later, would become your pastor and become my wife.

Well as you might infer, between that day on 57th Street and the day we walked down the aisle in a chapel on 55th Street, Sarah and I became quite fond of one another. We got to know each other's friends and quickly formed a whole network of people that we loved to be around and who made up a community of friends that felt like family.

So you can imagine how it felt when, midway through our second year of dating, Sarah told me that she was moving to New York City. I remember the moment very clearly. I was on a treadmill at the University Gym when I saw Sarah walk over to me with a bounce in her step and her eyes beaming. Then, with unadulterated joy, she told me that she was offered this prestigious yearlong internship with a renowned Lutheran pastor on the Upper West Side.

Now, I'm not a total jerk, so I mustered the decency to congratulate her and tell her how proud I was of her. I could tell that her mind was already

But what was most present to my mind at that moment *wasn't* all the Indian food we'd be eating in Jackson Heights or the afternoon runs we'd be taking in Central Park or all the bagels from Lenny's on West 97th that I'd be smuggling back to Chicago in my luggage.

I wasn't thinking about being with Sarah in New York— I was thinking about being without Sarah in Chicago. I was wondering how she could imagine leaving this incredible community we'd formed, this incredible neighborhood that we'd made our own. And mostly, how she could stomach the idea of leaving me!

We were in very different frames of mind. For the one who's leaving, it's all jitters and excitement. For the one being left behind, it's another story entirely.

-That's certainly the case in the Gospel reading for today. In this passage, Jesus parts company with his disciples. For three years they wandered together all over the Judean countryside, teaching, healing, and sharing their lives. They had persevered through some tough times. Jesus had to rebuked his disciples several times. Their relationship endured betrayals and desertions, death on a cross and a miraculous resurrection. So it's safe to say that they'd been through a lot together.

Our passage describes Jesus taking his leave from them once more, this time for good. After walking with them as far as Bethany, the Scripture says that Jesus lifted up his hands to bless them, and in the middle of that blessing, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.

This story is called the "Ascension" and today is called "Ascension Sunday" because the most dramatic element of this story is clearly the part where Jesus gets swept up in a cloud. It's clearly important. It's so important that it made it into the Apostle's Creed – "he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father."

It's so important that churches have split over how to understand it. Martin Luther thought that, even though Jesus ascended to sit at the right hand of the Father, he was still present with us at communion. Somehow Jesus could be both in heaven and in, with, and under the bread. But for another Protestant Reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, the fact that this passage says that Jesus ascended into heaven means that he can't be in our communion bread. He's at the right hand of the Father.

The Ascension is also important because it foreshadows our own ascension. As the Venerable Bede, a British Monk who lived in the 7th and 8th Centuries put it, "First, Christ had to shed his blood for the redemption of the world. Then, through his resurrection and ascension, he opened to human beings the gate of the heavenly kingdom."

These are all good reasons to focus on Jesus's ascension. But when we only focus on the one who's leaving, it's easy to miss the ones who got left behind. Like Sarah running off to the big city lights, Jesus gets beamed up to the pearly gates while his friends are left behind to figure out what to do next.

So today, I'd like to invite us to take a look at the Ascension from a different angle. From the perspective of those who get left behind.

Just for a little context, let's consider what other sources tell us we should do if we get left behind.

If you're one of the 63 million people who have a copy of the *Left Behind* series, written by evangelical pastors Timothy LeHaye and Jerry Jenkins, you might have been told that getting left behind is a reason to be afraid! In those stories, the good Christians get raptured away and those who get "left behind" seem apparently doomed to spend eternity in separation from God.

A better place to look is the end of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew's Gospel ends with the resurrected Jesus giving the Great Commission: "Go forth and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

These examples make what Jesus says to his disciples in Luke all the more surprising. He doesn't tell them to be afraid. And he doesn't tell them to get to work on building the kingdom of God. Instead, Jesus tells his disciples to "sit still."

The Greek word here is *καθίσατε*. It literally means – sit down, hang tight, park it. Jesus says, "I am sending upon you what my Father promised, so *sit still* here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Sit still. Remain where you are. Wait for what's been promised to you.

This is a funny way to end a Gospel. It sounds more like what you say to a squirrely three year old who won't stop squirming in his chair at the dinner table. Sit still. Be patient. Don't get figety. This is a funny way to end a Gospel.

But if we are to believe Luke, the disciples didn't think Jesus was joking. Instead, they did exactly what Jesus told them to do. Instead of running away in fear, instead of running off to get to work, these disciples sat tight. And waited. And worshipped.

What could these words have to say to us here today? What could they mean in a world where sitting still for too long puts one at risk of being left behind? Where even the idea of sitting still makes us uneasy. What could Jesus's words have to say to a world in which the time we have traditionally set apart to sit down and worship God is increasingly encroached upon by sports, brunch, and yard work.

I think they have a lot to say to our culture of overwork, of tireless productivity and the incessant drive for efficiency. And I think they probably have a lot to say to us right here at Bethlehem. 'Cause we've done our fair share of waiting around here, too, waiting for summer, waiting for a new lead pastor, waiting for the these long-anticipated building changes to take shape, waiting for there to be a season where there's not so much change...

So what does it mean for us to heed the words of the gospel today, to "sit still and remain in our city until we're clothed with power from on high?"

In my own scholarship, I spend a lot of time reading psychological studies about how human beings make important, life-and-death, moral decisions. And the literature is quite clear on at least one point. In clinical situations, when you put a person under conditions of high stress and force them to make a decision very quickly, the reptilian brain kicks in. This is the domain of our fight or flight mechanisms. These reflexes were extremely important for our species' survival. You don't want to have to stop and think about what to do when a poisonous snake strikes at your leg. But while these psychological mechanisms are quick, they aren't especially accurate. So when we are stressed and in a time crunch, we tend to make more mistakes and our moral deliberations tend to be more selfish than when we are relaxed and given ample time. There is empirical backing to the old saying that haste makes waste.

But there is another, more spiritual insight to be had here. I can't tell you how many times I've been sitting at my desk, trying to understand a delicate theological argument or working through a problem in my dissertation, and I just get stuck. Writers talk about this all the time. There are some days when the stars all align and the words just fly onto the page. And there are others days when I feel like I would have done better to clean the garage.

Sarah knows when I'm having the latter kind of day. She walks in the front door to see my hair standing straight up, my back and neck contorted in some unnatural posture, and my face lurching toward the screen as if the answer I'm looking for is hidden somewhere in between those pixels.

The more I try to force an argument or an idea to come, the fuzzier it gets. And yet it is *routinely* the case that the idea I was pushing myself so hard to grasp becomes perfectly clear the moment I stop grasping for it.

It's usually an hour or two later that it happens. Sometimes I'm out for a run and the idea just appears in a moment of simple brilliance. Or I can be playing trains with Benjamin and the connection I was trying to pin down with my own mental powers descends softly upon me from somewhere else, a gift from some other power, one higher than my own.

I think that this is the heart of Jesus's insight. He knew that if the disciples tried to carry on doing ministry on their own steam, if they followed the urge to go forth and make disciples of all nations without first sitting still, worshipping, and waiting for God's power and direction to descend, they would only tie themselves up in knots.

And so the disciples who watched Jesus ascend into heaven remained in the Temple; they worshipped, they waited, and they opened themselves up to receive power from on high whenever it happened to show up. And that power did show up. On Pentecost, it appeared as tongues of fire and transformed a rag-tag bunch of Galilean peasants into a movement that would spread throughout Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

As a matter of fact, that movement spread all the way to the banks of the Fox River here in St. Charles, Illinois. There, in the early 1850s, a group of Swedish immigrants waited to receive that power from on high, and it moved them to build a small framed cottage – Bethlehem’s very first building project. Even after that cottage was stolen, they continued to wait for God’s power to move, even though it meant worshipping all the way down in Geneva for nearly three decades. For a century and a half, these ancestors in the faith have continually worshipped God and faithfully waited for that power from on high to show up. And so long as there are souls here to wait for it, that power will continue to descend upon us to shed light on our way.

And all God’s people said.

Amen.