

Enough of a Messiah?

Acts 1: 6-14

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Prayer: Almighty God, we are not usually witness to miracles or visions of fire and clouds. Our fears are often more compelling than our faith. Yet you break through our reservations and protective defenses to baptize us with the Holy Spirit – your joy draws us. Help us now to look up to know you and to serve one another in your name...

It's the waiting. It's not knowing how to plan. It's cancelling and rescheduling and then figuring out how to do it a different way. We are resilient and creative; we are exhausted and fearful. At once. How do we not waste time on the things that will not matter, anyway? Where can we lean in and put our energy in areas that won't be erased by restrictions or the simple reality that life went another way? Lots of things I used to think were important to do are impossible now, things I hadn't gotten around to – suddenly have jumped to the front burner.

The pandemic has changed what is possible in the measure of our days. Worldwide.

It's also a remarkable parallel of the disciples' dilemma in Acts 1. Jesus withdraws from them and they are left with the deep existential question about how to begin to take up the details of their lives. They asked: "Lord is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you..." And they were encouraged to live in faith, in this in-between time not knowing exactly how it will all work out, but being reassured that great things can't help but come – because the power of the Holy Spirit is alive, as surely as Jesus himself had been their friend.

Albert Einstein said that "imagination is more important than knowledge." Creative intelligence has to do with how you put things together, how you remember things, how you are able to make connections between things. It is what you do with what you know, who you know, how you imagine new uses and new connections with the facts which are in your possession. The disciples were in that moment of using their imagination together with their knowledge.

In the last chapter of Luke's gospel Jesus says, "these are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures... Scholars tell us that Acts is like the second half of the gospel of Luke and if you skip John's gospel and start reading at Acts, the story continues, Jesus is lifted up as he finishes talking to them and the scriptures say "a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven..."

You can use your imagination here...I wonder what it was like for them, to have been called as disciples, no longer as servants, but now as his friends, to have three intense years of ministry with him, participating in the healing, in the teaching, in questioning the authorities, witnessing his death, recognizing him in resurrection and now watching as he is taken out of their sight. Knowing what they know about him, what would that be like? Are they feeling grateful for the time they had, or are they overwhelmed by loss? As Acts begins would they feel the loss of his presence, or would they feel as though they had gained the whole world? Has he been enough of a Messiah to them?

Loss is one of the most spiritually challenging experiences which we face – finding a way to live through life's losses without burying the better part of ourselves along the way; how we maintain our humanity when we have lost more than we were prepared to lose. Losing a loved one, losing our health, losing a livelihood in a difficult economy, losing our daily routines in a pandemic, losing common sense to fear.

In a letter to the United Church of Christ churches in the Southern New England conference, Tiffany Vail wrote this week: "While much of the response to "reopening" has focused on the economy, we want to remind people... that the word "economy" comes from the Greek "οικονομία" oikonomía—meaning the whole household of God." She goes on to say: that "To care for the whole household of God means prioritizing not just the care of the fit and healthy, but of the sick and the lonely, the very old and very young. To care for the whole household of God means prioritizing the care of those most at risk...We have yet to see this prioritizing from our national and state leadership. We expect the Church to behave differently."

I think she is right. Pointed yes, but right about the church.

There is a lot that hasn't come together still. And some days our losses overwhelm us. Jesus connected people's sense of loss with God's healing and mercy – you have been bleeding for 12 years, now you are healed; all you have is 5 loaves and 2 fish, now we will bless them and share them and take up 12 basketfuls of leftovers; you mourn the death of your brother Lazarus, behold he lives...And Jesus made these connections with people you wouldn't necessarily expect: non-Jews, women, tax collectors, lepers and children. We are each invited to find our own healing, and to redeem the places of our lives where hope is lost, because Jesus was Messiah enough to invite us into a life of faith, not do it all for us.

Imagination is more important than knowledge. In Acts 1, the disciples stand looking up at Jesus, disappearing from them, and from then on, it will be all about the quality of their imagination to bring the news of Christ's continuing love for humanity. The quality and depth of our imagination

will determine the connections we can make between the historical Jesus and the faith that can be lived here and now – imagination and knowledge work together to move faith forward.

In the end, the disciples did combine their knowledge of Jesus with imagination and share the good news in the same astonishing way Jesus did, performing miracles, and calling out unexpected people, naming and affirming faith when they found it even in unexpected places. But will we? Will we see in our losses, God's redemption, will we permit the healing of our wounds, the resurrection of our souls, and will we turn with knowledge and imagination and share a word in faith? A walk of faith? A life of faith? Even now...

Remember what you know is true, and be encouraged to walk in faith, God's living spirit is alive – available where your steps take you even while we are apart from one another.

Benediction:

May the truth that makes us free, the hope that never dies, and the love that casts out fear, lead us forward together, till the dayspring breaks and the shadows flee away. The peace of God that passes all understanding, that peace which the world can neither give nor take away, abide with you to bless you, this day, and forever more. Amen.

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