

Waiting on the Lord
Acts 1:1-14

Now, I know. We Presbyterians don't exactly follow along with the liturgical year. We can't even identify all those saints, let alone tell you the days on which they are celebrated. But we do observe some of the traditional feasts which celebrate key events in the life of Christ, Christmas and Easter especially. So, why not this day? Why not Pentecost? Why doesn't most of the Protestant Church celebrate the birthday of the Church?

It's not like the story isn't full of drama: the sound of a mighty rushing wind, tongues of fire resting on the disciples, the crowds of people from all over the world hearing the gospel proclaimed in their native languages. And it isn't like the story isn't important – Peter explains that this is nothing less than an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the people of God, an event that was prophesied by the prophet Joel hundreds of years before Jesus was born.

Come to think of it, God even commanded His people to celebrate this festival back in the Old Testament days. That's why there was such a great crowd gathered in Jerusalem on the day that Acts chapter 2 describes – they had come to celebrate the Feast of Weeks, to bring offerings to God when their spring crops of barley and wheat were harvested.

And looking back on the events of Acts chapter 2 from some 2000 years later, we can see how the New Testament festival of Pentecost fulfilled the Old Testament Feast of Weeks. For Pentecost celebrates the beginning of the harvest, the time when God poured out His Holy Spirit on the Church and began to gather in to His Kingdom people from every tribe and tongue and nation.

So, why don't we Protestant Christians tend to celebrate this great feast? We'd probably like to think it's because we're so interested in getting along with the rest of the harvest. Of course, we Presbyterians tend to be a bit awkward about sharing our faith personally, but we enjoy hearing about the great work our Presbytery's Evangelists are doing, and we participate in that work with our prayers and our gifts. But in any event, we understand evangelism as something we need to do, just as farmers have to get busy about harvesting when the time is appropriate. Don't we have a story to tell, a song to be sung, a message to give to the nations?

In fact, isn't that what Jesus told His disciples to do in this passage from Acts chapter 1? Didn't He tell them to be witnesses to Him in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth? And aren't we all called to follow the disciples' example? So who has time to celebrate when we all need to get busy?

But before we rush off, let's remember something else Jesus told His disciples to do, something that explains why Pentecost is such an important feast for all Christians. For in verse four, before Jesus called the disciples to go, He first called them to wait, to wait for the promise of the Father, the promise the prophets made of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the promise that was fulfilled on Pentecost.

But such waiting goes against every fiber of our being, doesn't it? I mean, don't we need to get out there and preach the gospel and convert the sinful heathen so that they might have eternal life? Isn't the certainty of Jesus' return a reminder that we are working against a deadline?

No, waiting is the last thing on the minds of us American Christians. And it was probably the last thing the disciples wanted to do, either. But they needed to wait on God for the same reason that we do: because the job that faced them was simply beyond their abilities.

Oh, sure, the disciples had had plenty of preparation. They had the knowledge of Jesus' teachings and the knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures, and we know a lot of these things too. But even this wasn't enough, for they didn't yet have power. They had been baptized with water, but they had not yet been anointed with the power of the Holy Spirit. And they would need such divine, supernatural power for the ministry to which God was calling them.

For without the power of the Holy Spirit, there was no way that the events of Pentecost could have taken place. Think about it: just after Peter preached the sermon he began in our responsive reading, 3000 of the men of Jerusalem became Christians. And this number had to include hundreds of the same people who had called for Jesus to be crucified a little less than two months previously. And come to think of it, without the power of the Holy Spirit, there's no way any of the rest of the events of the Book of Acts could have taken place. There's no way these Jewish disciples could have marched into Samaria, the home of their traditional enemies, and had anyone listen to them, let alone become followers of Jesus. There's no way a bunch of Gentiles would have ever believed Paul, a Jewish rabbi, when he talked about another Jew who rose from the dead. No, the disciples would need the power of the Holy Spirit being poured out at Pentecost throughout their ministry. And so even though God had called them to an urgent task, an important task, they first had to wait on God's power.

And the same thing is true for us. We must remember, as we seek to busy ourselves about the work of the kingdom, that we can do nothing without God's power. No matter how careful our plans or preparations, no matter how good our intentions may be, it is not we that do ministry. It is not we who will bring reconciliation between the races. It is not we who will bring hope to the hopeless and comfort to the grieving. It is not we who will take the gospel to the ends of the earth. It is God that does ministry – He just allows us to help.

No, we do not have the power to convert a single soul, for it is only God Who can give new life to the spiritually dead. We do not have the power effectively to teach the truths of Christ, for it is only God Who can open the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf.

And so the same thing that was true for the disciples is true for us today: in whatever ministry we may be engaged, our first and most important task is waiting on God to do what we cannot do. Action is important, but action should never come first. Action alone is never sufficient. Instead, we are called to wait on the Lord.

But what sort of power are we waiting for? Well, the disciples didn't really know that either. Remember, until Acts 2, Pentecost hadn't happened yet. They had no idea that God was going to pour out His Spirit on them as tongues of fire. They had no idea that they would be given the supernatural ability to speak all sorts of foreign languages – they just knew they needed to wait for some sort of power before embarking on their mission.

Just so, we don't know exactly how God will empower us to do whatever ministry He has called us to do. But there is one thing we do know – the way the disciples waited for that power. And so even

if God chooses to clothe us with a different kind of power for a different kind of assignment, we can wait for that power the same way that they did.

How do we wait on the Lord? In the first place, we must wait faithfully. We must wait in dependence and trust. Remember, God called the disciples to remain in Jerusalem, the same place where Jesus had been crucified and thus the place where they were surrounded by his enemies and theirs. God called them to stay in the very place they found most dangerous and uncomfortable. And God calls us to do the same thing.

No, we may not be in danger of crucifixion the way the disciples were. But the fact is that the people who most need to hear the gospel are often those with the most personal problems, those who are the hardest to get along with. Because of the sin in their lives, they tend to be hurting, unpleasant, even dangerous. They tend to be the sorts of people we generally avoid. But it is no use waiting on God to send you to minister to the lost and hurting if at the same time you move far away from them and never have anything to do with them. Maintaining proximity, remaining in relationship with those who are lost and hurting is a prerequisite for the ministry you will eventually begin. You can't preach the gospel to people if you aren't at least on speaking terms with them. You can't reach the lost if you never step outside your comfort zone.

How else do we wait? If we wait faithfully, we also wait prayerfully. The Scripture says that all the disciples continued in prayer and supplication. Now, it was ten days between the day that Jesus was taken up into heaven and the day of Pentecost when the power of God fell upon them. But when they began to pray for God's power, they didn't know how long it would take God to answer their prayers – for all they knew it could have taken ten years. But they knew that they should pray, no matter how long it would take. And so they prayed until God gave them the power that they needed.

In the same way, it's not enough for us simply to maintain contact with the lost and hurting, even with those who may have hurt us, so that we might minister to them. We also need to pray for them, just as persistently as we pray for our sick and hurting family and friends. So, don't just get mad with those national and world leaders whom you think are messing everything up. Put them on your prayer list, along with those folks much closer to home who have hurt us and our loved ones much more personally. For why should we expect God to empower us to minister to those for whom we have not prayed?

But there's one more thing the disciples did to prepare themselves to be empowered for ministry. For if they waited faithfully and prayerfully, verse 14 also says that all of the eleven waited in one accord. That means that they were all of one mind. They were all determined to wait for God's answer to their prayers. They all agreed with one another, and so they stayed in Jerusalem together and so they prayed together.

Just so, nothing compromises the message of the church today more than disagreements among us Christians. On the other hand, nothing is a greater testimony to the truth of the gospel than when we all agree. So as we maintain our contacts with lost and hurting people, and as we lift up our earnest prayers for them, before we can announce the message of God's reconciliation with the world through Christ, we must seek to reconcile ourselves one to another within the body of Christ.

But here something interesting happens. If we can reach out even to those with whom we disagree, and if we can continue to pray for them and if we can keep on loving other Christians in spite of our disagreements, aren't we, just by doing these things, demonstrating the character of Christ? Aren't we thus bearing witness to the reality of the Spirit of Christ within our lives? It thus turns out that even in order to wait in faithfulness and prayer and unity for the power of Christ, we need to be filled with the Spirit of Christ.

And so on this Pentecost Sunday, let's pray for God to fill us with His Spirit anew and afresh. Let's pray that God would give us His Spirit of repentance, of trust and of love that we might wait as He would have us to wait, and then go as He would have us to go.