

“What Next?”

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Acts 1:15 In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, 16 “Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus— 17 for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.”

Acts 1:21 So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” 23 So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias.

24 Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen 25 to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.”

26 And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

BACK TO THE UPPER ROOM

The risen Jesus had just given his disciples a big job to do. He told them that they should proclaim the gospel to the whole world.

But, before they could begin this task they were told to wait upon the coming of the Spirit.

And then Jesus ascended into heaven leaving the disciples alone.

The Bible tells us that at first the disciples were a bit unnerved by the ascension.

They spent quite a long time just gazing up at the sky.

So much so that it took some messengers from heaven to get them moving again.

They asked,

“Why are you guys standing around looking up into the sky?
Are you waiting for the second coming or something?”

So, with the encouragement of the angels, the disciples went back to Jerusalem.

And they gathered once again in that upper room.

It must have been a pretty big upper room because the Bible tells us there were about 120 of them in those days.

APOSTLES AND APOSTATES

And Peter, never at a loss for words (even when he didn't what to say) stood up and said,

“Well, the first thing we've got to do is replace Judas.”

Peter believed that the betrayal of Judas was all a part of the plan.

He even quoted Scripture, a Psalm that said,

“May another take his place of leadership.” (Acts 1:20)

(You may have noticed that we've left out some verses in our lesson for today.

Peter's speech about the death of Judas is too gory for mixed company.

But, you can read that version at home if you like.)

Suffice it to say that that from the very beginning the church was filled with apostles and apostates. And sometimes they are the same person.

William Willimon wrote, “The church meets no failure or deceit in the world that it has not encountered in itself—even among those who founded and led the very first congregation.”

Judas was not the only apostate among the disciples.

You could argue that Peter was one as well.

He boldly proclaimed that he would never abandon Jesus.

And yet, when the time of testing came, Peter denied he even knew Jesus and cursed like a sailor.

The risen Lord would forgive Peter for his denial.
And the apostate would once again become an apostle.

But, Peter still had to learn to speak less
and listen more.

Peter still thought that he knew God's will before he listened for the call of the Spirit.

And I think today's lesson is an example of that.

Peter wanted to get on with the business of the kingdom instead of waiting for the Spirit.

And in his mind, in order for that to happen they needed to elect a new apostle.

ELECTION BY CHANCE

None of the others disagreed with Peter.

They had totally forgotten about waiting on the coming of the Spirit, and instead decided to hold an election.

So how should they do it?

What criteria should they use in selecting the new apostle?

Well, if they were to be Jesus' witnesses in the world it stood to reason that they needed someone who had been there from the beginning. They needed someone who had seen and heard everything that Jesus had said and done.

And so that was their criteria.

They wanted someone who had been with Jesus from the time of His baptism until His ascension.

Only two people filled that bill.

One was a man named Barsabbas.

And the other guy was named Matthias.

But, which one should they pick?

The disciples pray about it.

And then they do the equivalent flipping a coin or rolling dice.

They cast lots.

They believe that the will of God will be revealed through the luck of the draw.

Heads we pick Matthias.

Tails we pick Barsabbas.

Heads it is.

Congratulations Matthias.

You are now an apostle.

And this is the last we hear of Matthias.

I've always been a bit skeptical about this election by chance.

To me it always seemed to smack of superstition instead of faith.

Yes, it's true that the lot may have fallen to Matthias because he was God's chosen.

But, then again, maybe not.

PAUL, CHOSEN BY THE SPIRIT

I tend to agree with those commentators who suggest that the "real" 12th apostle, the apostle chosen by the Spirit, was Paul.

We hear a lot about Paul in the book of Acts, and the letters of Paul comprise a large part of the New Testament.

Paul was far and away the most effective apostle when it came to explaining and building the kingdom of God.

But, no one would have ever selected Paul to be an apostle.

Paul's election to the office of apostle was a real surprise, even to Paul himself!

He was an enemy of the early church.
He went out of his way to persecute and destroy the church.

He approved when they stoned Stephen for preaching the gospel.

But, by the power of the Spirit,
the church's early enemy was turned into its greatest evangelist!

God's ways are truly not our ways.
And that's why it's so hard to perceive the working of the Spirit.

The Spirit's solution to our problems may be to turn an enemy into an evangelist.
But, often, in our anxiety we don't wait for those opportunities to present themselves.

The Bible tells us that we should be quick to listen and slow to speak.
(James 1:19)

But, in our anxiety sometimes we're just the opposite when it comes to God's will.
We're slow to listen and quick to speak.

I wonder if this story is at some level an example of how Jesus' disciples are often reluctant to wait upon the leading of God's Spirit.

FAITH IN A TIMES OF TRANSITION

Times of uncertainty and transition are not easy.
We want to know, and we want to know right now...what's next?

And in our anxiety we "roll the dice" instead of waiting upon the Spirit.

Anxious people don't like to wait.

Like Peter, we go ahead and say something
...even if we don't know what we're talking about!

I wonder if this is why the church has established such elaborate rules and regulations over the years. We're not so good at waiting on the Spirit.

We form a committee, receive a report and vote.
Even if the vote is close we assume that it is the "will of God".

And, because we don't wait upon the Spirit,
sometimes the actions of the church are due more to political maneuvering
than discernment.

Over the years the church has often been more interested in electing the
12th apostle than waiting for the leading of the Spirit.

This has made us rigid in our beliefs and in our approach to others.

There's no room for even the slightest deviation in theology or practice.

And sometimes our beliefs and our practices...
have even proved to be contrary to the Word of God.
God speaks, but we do not listen.

Maybe it's because we don't wait upon the Spirit.
We don't have enough faith to wait and watch and listen in those in be-
tween times.

But, I've found that those in between times,
those times when we're not sure what happen next,
are the incubators for true faith.

When I look back on my life, I see that this is true.
I have heard the call of the Spirit most clearly when I was anxious and
didn't have a clue about where to go or what to do next.

But, our fears often keep us from hearing the call of the Spirit during those
wilderness times.

We are so afraid of what may happen tomorrow that we fail to notice the
manna from heaven that God gives us today.

RESTORING THE KINGDOM

The Bible tells us that a thousand years is less than a day from God's perspective.

Maybe we would be more willing to wait upon the Spirit if we took the long view.

When we read the history of God's people we learn that sometimes God's plan took generations to accomplish.

Even when they arrived in the Promised Land the journey wasn't over. There was still more to learn.

God still had places for them to go.
God was forever (as the prophet Isaiah put it) doing a "new thing" among his people.

Indeed, the story of Jesus was one of those new things.

It was a story that fulfilled prophecy, and yet it was also a story that broke the mold.

The biggest problem faced by these early disciples is that they were stuck in the old way of thinking. They couldn't get beyond the idea that they were God's chosen people who would live forever in the Promised Land.

Maybe that's why they thought it was so important to select a 12th disciple to parallel the 12 tribes of Israel. Maybe they thought that they were the New Israel, a new kind of chosen people, but God's chosen nonetheless.

My clue for this interpretation comes from what happened earlier in this same chapter.

The disciples ask Jesus a question that they have asked him many times before.

Just before his ascension they ask,
"Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6)

The disciples had been raised on a dream of past glory.
They fondly remembered when David was a powerful king.
They reveled in stories of the splendor of Solomon's temple.

In those days people respected and even feared Israel.

They longed for a return to the good old days.
They wanted to make Israel great again!

And they thought that this was the primary mission of the Messiah, to restore Israel to what it used to be.

From their perspective since they were God's chosen, how could God not give them the victory?

They had waited so long.
Wouldn't now be a good time to restore the kingdom?

These first disciples spent time with Jesus before and after the resurrection.
They saw with their own eyes the power and hope of God's salvation.

But, they still didn't interpret that message correctly.

Over and over again Jesus told the disciples that this was not the point of his kingdom.
His kingdom was not of this world.

Jesus talked about spiritual transformation instead of political transformation.

But, here they are asking the same old question.
Will the kingdom come now?
Is now the time when we can throw the Romans out and gain control of our political future?

A GREATER KINGDOM

Jesus answered them by saying,

“It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority.”

This not knowing has always been a difficult thing for us to accept.

Our basic need for security tempts us to rebel against this foundational concept.

We want control. We think that we know what needs to be done to bring in the kingdom here and now, if only Jesus would listen to us!

In order to be an effective witness, we must break that cycle. We must trust the seasons of our life to the sovereign Lord.

Our ideas about the kingdom must always be provisional, and open to correction because the kingdom we proclaim is not our own.

We don't say “our kingdom come and our will be done”.

We say “thy kingdom come and thy will be done.”

Our elections and our actions are but temporary measures until God by the coming of His Spirit allows us to see the truth more clearly.

Our dreams for the kingdom are always too small. Only when we are open to being filled with the power of God's Spirit can we bear witness to God's kingdom

Jesus told his disciples that the kingdom of God would be more than just Israel.

The disciples would proclaim the message of the kingdom in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

An authentic witness must be expansive. The good news is not just for me and my family and my friends.

The good news is not just for people like me. The good news is not just for my country.

The good news is for the world.

Our dreams... no matter how bold... are always too small and limited.

The only cure for a small dream is the eye opening, vision-expanding power of God's Spirit.

Like those first disciples, we need to learn how to wait where God tells us to wait.

Instead of relying upon our own understanding, we need to learn to rely upon God's will and God's empowering Spirit.

It is dangerous to think that we have the answers to questions that are above our pay grade.
We do not.

The Kingdom is almost always different from what we think it is.

Church Councils can and do make mistakes.
Terrible mistakes.

Sometimes people we have labeled apostles turn out to be apostates ... and sometimes people we have labeled apostates turn out to be apostles.

The church is in constant need of reformation.
But, we can take comfort in the fact that God will not allow our mistakes to stand.

In the final analysis it is Jesus who is the head of the church and anything we do or say is subject to the correction of His Word and Spirit.

The Spirit has a way of overruling our ill considered elections.

THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

So I can affirm what we say every week.
I do believe in the holy, catholic church.

But, holy does not mean perfect.

Holy means we are called by God to be a witness.
 We are a witness to the grace of God in our own life.
 We simply tell what happened to us when Jesus came into our lives.

And the church is catholic with a little "C."
 Catholic with a little "c" means universal.

There is one true church and that church is universal.
 And that one true church is for the world.

Our message is not limited to one group.

The charge to Jesus to his disciples is to be a witness...

to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the whole world.

God's will is still done through very flawed frightened people
 ... people like you and me.

We call these frightened and misguided people... the church.

The Spirit still comes to us.
 And lives are still changed by the power of that Spirit in the church.

People bound by their own small dream are given a greater vision
 and obstacles that once seemed insurmountable are swept away.

THE ARENA IN WHICH FAITH IS FORMED

In last week's sermon, we remembered the Great Commandment.
 Jesus told us to love one another as he first loved us.

But, he failed to mention that some of our brothers and sisters have this unfortunate tendency to step on our toes from time to time.

And I'm afraid we return the favor.

Whatever problems you have in the world, you will have those same problems in the church.

From the very beginning, the Christian community was a community with apostles and apostates.

And sometimes it was hard to tell those two groups apart.

Followers of Jesus were not always faithful.

In fact our story for today starts with a crisis in leadership because one of the first disciples betrayed the Lord and came to a tragic end.

But, the church, this frail and flawed community is not the object of our faith.

It is the arena in which faith is formed.

The church is that place in which we find that God's grace stretches down to embrace apostates and apostles alike. That's really good news because I believe that within each of us there is both apostasy and apostleship.

I think most of us in the church are like Peter.

We speak when we should listen.

We often don't have the courage of our convictions.

Our elections represent our wishes and our superstition instead of faith. Our assemblies are a reflection of our politics instead of our devotion.

But, that's no reason to just stand around looking up into the skies ...waiting for Jesus to come again.

Like those first disciples we've got good news to preach.

It's good news that transcends the barriers of language and culture.

It's good news that brings us together instead of tearing us apart.

On our own we can't preach that news.

But, when the wind of the Spirit comes,

we experience the presence of God in the ministry of imperfect brothers and sisters...
folks who come from the most unlikely places.

Places like...Galilee,
or Kissimmee, or Saint Cloud,
or Korea, or Brazil, or Puerto Rico, or Jamaica, or Trinidad, and yes, even
Yee-haw Junction...

But, you'll have to wait for that Spirit to come.

That's next week.
We call it Pentecost.

Believe me.
You do not want to miss it!

Amen.