

The Reason for the Season

Acts 1:6-14

May 28, 2017

Lansdowne UMC

Last week, we spoke about the person of the Holy Spirit, and we talked about a few of the roles that the Holy Spirit takes in our lives. In particular we talked about the Holy Spirit as Advocate, as Comforter, and as Helper. We also spoke about how in the church year, we're in the season of Easter. The resurrection has happened, and we're waiting for Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit comes. We're in a season of waiting. Let me just fill that out a little more.

The church year essentially follows the life of Christ. We begin in Advent, considering the promise of Jesus' coming. We celebrate Christ's incarnation at Christmas and then the coming of the Magi shortly after that during Epiphany. In the season after Epiphany we follow Jesus as he begins his ministry. He's baptized and then tempted, and he goes out preaching and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. After a time, he goes up a mountain and is transfigured, at which point we enter Lent, focusing our eyes on the path to Jesus' death on a cross. Jesus is raised from the dead on Easter Sunday. And during the season of Easter, he appears to his disciples for 40 days. And so on his Ascension day, which we observe today, Jesus ascended into heaven to be with God the Father. After Pentecost next week, we enter into the season of after Pentecost, which has the boring name of "Ordinary time." That really just means that we number the weeks and work out what it means to be the Spirit-filled church witnessing to Christ in the world.

The church year isn't just a convenient way to tell Jesus' story annually, although it is convenient. But the church year speaks to the reality that God gives us seasons in our own lives.

Each God-given season has its own integrity. In each season we have a purpose. In each season there is something to be striving toward. There's an aim, a goal. But here's the thing about seasons: they don't last forever. There comes a time when God calls us to something new. (Before you get wondering: this isn't a euphemism for me getting reappointed or having a terminal illness or anything. I really am just speaking generally!)

We see the Twelve disciples go through these seasons of life. Take Peter, for example. God had him as a fisherman for a season. There was nothing glorious about it, but he was making ends meet. What was his aim? Well, food comes from somewhere, and so it was his job to get it for people-- probably for his own family too. There was nothing wrong with being a fisherman. He was probably pretty good at it. But then Jesus comes along and calls him to a new season. He says, "follow me" and so Peter leaves his fishing nets and follows Jesus. Being a fisherman was fine, but it would not have been fine to keep fishing once Jesus called him to something else. He had to enter a new season of learning from Jesus-- apprenticing with Jesus. It's a new season with a new goal: learn to live as Jesus lives. When Jesus is arrested, Peter enters a brief but significant season of testing. What's the goal in that season? To be faithful, of course, and emerge stronger. Well, he has some pretty major failures in this season, but God ends up using those failures anyway.

Finally, Peter comes to a season of resurrection faith. What is his aim during this season. Well, to pick his jaw up off the ground, first of all. But what else?

Before Jesus ascends, he gives the disciples a command and he gives them a promise. In verses 4-5 of Acts 1, just before where our reading started, it says that while the disciples and the risen Jesus were eating together, “he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for what the Father had promised. He said, “This is what you heard from me: John baptized with water, but in only a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

How’s that for an aim? Wait. Maybe that’s not what they wanted to hear. They ask Jesus, “well, is now the time that you’re going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” In other words, “we thought that whole Messiah-King-of-Israel thing was derailed when you got killed Jesus. But now that you’re back, is this it? Is God at last going to be king over the nations?

We expect Jesus to directly answer the question. We expect him to say, yes or no. And in fact the answer is a little bit of both. He will ascend to heaven and reign over all of creation at God’s right hand, but at the same time, you’re not going to see it in all places and at all times on earth. You’re going to have to wait. We expect a straight answer.

But Jesus doesn’t give them that. This is basically what he says: God’s got it covered. Don’t worry about it. You don’t have to know the dates and times when that season is coming. All you have to know is what

your task is for right now and be faithful to it. And here is what your purpose is: wait.

Why wait? Because the Holy Spirit is coming. He says in verse 8, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

A new season is coming, Jesus says. “You’re going to be my witnesses. You’re going to testify to others about what you have seen and heard with your own eyes. You’re going to tell others about how I was dead and now I’m alive, and how God has lifted me up to the position of highest authority.”

That season of witnessing is coming soon. But before *that* season-- the season of mission and witness-- Jesus says, ‘you need to enter into another season: a season of waiting for and pursuing the Holy Spirit’s empowerment for mission.’

Now, imagine you’re Peter. You’re still pretty fresh off of a significant failure in your discipleship-- you denied Jesus three times to save your own skin. But thankfully you serve a God who excels at bringing good out of bad. At the very least, your failure must have awakened you and the disciples around you for your need for more of God’s power in your life.

God, how many times have we messed up? How many times have we been unfaithful? But that’s a sign for us. It’s a sign that we need more of

God. We need God's help. Not a sort of empty optimism, but the real power of God. We need the Holy Spirit.

So when Jesus says, "wait until you receive the Holy Spirit's power," it seems pretty likely that Peter would jump right on that. "Yes, sign me up. I need your power God. It's clearer than ever to me, I can't do this on my own."

They're not equipped yet. They need God's power. Maybe you've heard the phrase before: "God doesn't call the equipped; God equips the called." That's what's going on here. The call to witness comes first. And Jesus promise to equip them comes with it.

Jesus doesn't send them out before equipping them. He doesn't send them out before they're ready. Instead, he says, "don't leave Jerusalem. Wait there until the promise of the Holy Spirit has been fulfilled."

The mother eagle wants her baby to fly. And when the baby is ready, she'll coax it out of the nest. Drop a little food nearby, maybe. But you know what happens if the baby doesn't come out of the nest when it's time.... She pushes it out. She's not going to push them out before they're ready. To do so would not produce the result that the mother wants. In the same way, Jesus doesn't push his disciples into witnessing before they're ready to do so. But when they're ready, it'll be time to witness. If they're ready, and they're not witnessing... well, they might just get pushed out of the nest.

I'm of the opinion that too often, the church has pushed people in ways that Jesus didn't. We tell people "Jesus calls you to witness, so get on

with it!” But maybe we’re not ready. The problem is that without the power of the Spirit, it’s not obvious to us how we could *ever* be empowered to witness. And so we don’t hope for it. We don’t want it. We’re afraid that God will push us to places that we don’t want to be, and all the while we forget that when we’re being faithful to our season, we’re in the will of God. And when we’re in the will of God, that’s the most fulfilled we can be as human beings.

I went through a season where I was called to be a computer engineer. I liked it. It was fun. I was good at it. And I did my best to be faithful to God in it. But when God called me to something new, there was not going to be any fulfillment in my life until I was faithful to that calling. Oh God knows I had excuse after excuse. But the reality is that when I quit my job and went to seminary, God equipped me in ways I couldn’t have possibly foreseen. And God is fulfilling me in incredible ways.

And that’s the experience of every person who steps out in faith to be faithful in the new season of life that God is calling them to. It doesn’t take a call to quit your job and go to seminary, or to leave and go on a missions trip to the Dominican Republic.

What season are you in? Are you being faithful to your season?

We are all called to move toward a season of witnessing. Just because you might not be ready to witness for Jesus *yet*, doesn’t mean you’re off the hook forever. There are really only two possible seasons for a Christian when it comes to witnessing. 1) We’re in a season of Spirit-filled witnessing. 2) We’re preparing for a season of Spirit-filled

witnessing-- perhaps for the first time, or perhaps simply due to the ebbs and flows of the practicalities of life.

What does it look like to be faithful in a season of waiting? It says that during this time, the disciples “were constantly devoting themselves to prayer.”

Why prayer? Is it because they’re just so holy and pious? No, it’s actually because they aren’t. They need God’s power to be witnesses to Christ, and they’re not fooling themselves into thinking otherwise. They’re not ready yet. They want to be faithful to the season that God has put them in, though.

What do you think that prayer might have sounded like? Well, after Pentecost, the church has grown and is being threatened by the authorities. And so how did they pray? They don’t pray for protection and safety. They pray for God’s power to witness. In Acts 4, it says that they raised their voices together and prayed, “grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” And then it says that when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.

Jesus made them a **promise**: you’ll soon receive the Spirit. They don’t just sit around passively waiting for it to happen. They pray. And God delivers on the promise.

What season are you in right now? What season are you being called to? Are you being called to actively pray and wait to be filled with the Holy Spirit? Or are you called to witness to Christ in a particular area of your life?

Wherever we are, we need God to equip us. Why don't we pray for that?