

WHEN THERE'S NOTHING YOU CAN DO  
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in Brookfield, Connecticut, on May 12, 2024  
Text: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, "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—for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry. So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 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."

So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

This morning, we have a funny little story from Acts. It's not one you hear preached very often. But it takes place during a very anxious time, and since these are anxious times that we're living in today, I thought it might be worth a look. Maybe it has something helpful to say.

So here's what's going on. The story takes place during the ten-day period between Jesus' ascension and the day of Pentecost. So Jesus has departed, and the Holy Spirit has not yet arrived. And if you remember, the very last thing Jesus told the disciples as he was floating up into the sky was that they should remain in Jerusalem and wait for the Spirit to come and baptize them.

So that's where we are. We're in that in-between period when the disciples are sitting around, twiddling their thumbs, waiting for the Spirit to show up. And on the one hand, you could say, "Well, they're only going to have to wait a few days. Big deal." But on the other hand, they have no way of knowing that. Jesus didn't give them a calendar with the date circled in red. So, in their minds, it could be a few days, it could be a few years, it could be a few decades before the Spirit arrives. And there's

nothing they can do to speed up the clock. There's nothing they can do to make the time go faster. They're just kind of stuck, which is never a fun place to be.

It's bad enough having to wait for something, but it's even worse when you don't know how long it's going to be. You feel powerless, and the longer you wait the more frustrated you get and the more you start thinking it's never going to happen. It's like when you order something on Amazon, and it gets delayed, and they don't give you a delivery date. Every day you go out to the mailbox, and everyday your heart sinks when you look inside and there's still no package.

That's how I imagine the disciples are feeling—except they're not waiting for a new coffee machine or a pack of undershirts. They're waiting for something that's going to transform their lives. They're waiting for God to fill them with new energy and give them a whole new sense of purpose. And not surprisingly, it's Peter who has an especially hard time with that.

Peter is not someone who's known for his patience. That's not one of his strengths. He's more of a take-the-bull-by-the-horns kind of guy. So, he does the first thing you do when there's

nothing you can do but you want to feel like you're doing something: He calls a meeting.

He gets together the entire church, every last follower of Jesus in the world, which at this point is about 120 people. And with everyone standing there listening, he does the second thing you do when there's nothing you can do but you want to feel like you're doing something: He makes a plan.

It's a plan to restore the disciples to their original number, after losing Judas. It's a plan to get things back on track after Jesus was killed and everything fell apart. It's a plan to start moving forward again. And as soon as Peter lays it out, he does the third and final thing you do when there's nothing you can do but you want to feel like you're doing something: He puts the plan into action.

He presents two candidates, he calls for a vote, and he declares the winner: Matthias. And after all that effort, after going through all those steps, Peter has accomplished precisely nothing. Yes, the disciples are back to the original number, but honestly, who cares? Jesus never said there had to be twelve of them, and filling out their ranks is not going to change a thing. The Spirit is going to arrive when the Spirit wants to arrive, and there's nothing anyone can do about it. So, the disciples are right back where they started—sitting around, twiddling their thumbs, waiting.

Lucky for them the waiting doesn't last too long. And when the Spirit arrives within a matter of days, that's when the real plan is put into action. Not the human plan, but the divine plan. Not the disciples' vision, but God's vision, which is bigger and better than anything they could've imagined.

So, it all works out in the end, thanks be to God, but it feels like a wasted opportunity. If only they could've trusted God a little bit more during that in-between time. If only they could've had a little more faith in Jesus' promise that his departure was not an ending but a beginning—the beginning of a new kind of community where they'd be empowered to carry on his ministry. They could've gotten so much more out of that time. Instead of calling meetings and holding elections, they could've

thought about who God was calling them to be in that moment of transition. Instead of distracting themselves with personnel issues, they could've prepared their hearts and minds for the future that was coming.

They probably would've been a lot more relaxed, and maybe they would've learned a thing or two about what it means to be God's people.

I think this is an important story for us to hear because we're going through our own moment of transition right now. The days when the church was a pillar of American society are long gone, and we're waiting to see what God has in store for us next, and we have no idea how long it'll take to get here. When will the Spirit arrive in our time? When will the church be re-born? When will a new vision emerge?

There's no way of knowing, and there's no way of speeding up the clock and making the time go faster. We're just kind of stuck, and that's never a fun place to be. But we don't have to approach it like the disciples did. We don't have to let ourselves become anxious.

C.S. Lewis said, "I'm sure that God keeps no one waiting unless he sees that it is good for him to wait." And according to our affirmation of faith today, all things on heaven and earth are "ruled and guided by God for such end as God's eternal wisdom, goodness, and justice have appointed." All of which points to the fact that we're here for a reason—that God has led us here for some purpose. And personally I think it has to do with formation. I think God is re-shaping us as a people, nurturing what needs to be nurtured and pruning what needs to be pruned, so we can be ready for the future God is bringing.

Two weeks ago, I was at a place called Launde Abbey in the U.K. It's an Anglican conference center, and I was taking an icon painting class. A lot of the other participants were vicars, and I was talking to one of them at lunch one day, and she asked me how many members my church has. I told her about a hundred, and she said, "Oh, so it's quite a large congregation." So, I asked her how many members does her church have, and she told

me she actually serves six different parishes, none of which has more than twenty members, and some of which have fewer than ten.

We worry about the decline of the church here in the U.S., but other places are in much worse shape than we are. And yet, you can feel the Spirit moving in those places just as powerfully as ever.

Launde has a chapel that dates back to the 11th century, and every morning there was a worship service. I slept through the first one because I was jet-lagged, but I went to all the rest, and they were amazing. Sitting in that thousand-year-old space, you can't help but think about how long the church has been around, and how many changes the world has been through in that time. And yet, here's this bread that was broken just like it was for the disciples, and here's this wine that's been poured out for countless souls. It made all the challenges we face today seem like a passing storm in the night.

So when there's nothing you can do but you want to feel like you're doing something, just remember that the dawn is coming and the sun will shine again just like it has every day since the first day of creation. Amen.

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#### \*AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

adapted from *The Scots Confession*

**We confess and acknowledge one God alone, to whom alone we must cleave, whom alone we must serve, whom alone we must worship, in whom alone we put our trust, and by whom we confess and believe all things in heaven and earth, visible and invisible, to have been created, to be retained in their being, and to be ruled and guided by God for such end as God's eternal wisdom, goodness, and justice have appointed, and to the manifestation of God's own glory. Amen.**