

Is this the time?

So I thought this might be a good time to check in with you all. How are you feeling these days about the state of our world? On a scale of one to five (one being terrible, and five great) hold up your fingers. How about the state of our country? Are you feeling impatient? Waiting for something to happen? “Lord, is this the time?”

And what are we waiting for, exactly? I confess that I keep waiting for a certain world leader’s approval rating to drop, and for impeachment proceedings to begin. I could be waiting a long time! Of course, implicit in my impatience is the assumption that someone else could do things better. Which may or may not be true. (Certainly the options in our last election weren’t very inspiring!)

There are plenty of reasons to be pessimistic about the state of our country and world. There always are. Sometimes I think it’s human nature to be pessimistic. But what if we were absolutely confident that something good was going to happen; it’s just a question of when? We’d still be impatient, wouldn’t we? “Lord, is this the time? Is it? When Lord? When?” I’m not sure about pessimism, but it’s definitely human nature to be impatient!

Jesus’ disciples were absolutely confident that Israel’s kingdom would one day be restored. Perhaps even soon! Of course, they had good reason to be confident. That reason was sitting right there in their midst. I’m talking about Jesus. What a roller coaster! One minute he was proclaiming God’s kingdom, the next he was dying on a cross. But now, he’s been resurrected! Which was God’s way of vindicating everything Jesus ever did, and confirming everything he ever said.

Think about it. Because of the Resurrection, because of Easter, we know that everything Jesus said and taught is true. Everything he promised will come to pass. God’s kingdom will come. Peace and justice will prevail. It’s just a question of when.

Tomorrow is the annual Memorial Day peace picnic put on by the People of Faith for Peace. Hopefully the weather will be nice! And a large crowd will gather—just like the disciples gathered—to eat, and play, and sing, and confidently proclaim that peace is on its way. Hooray!

Except, suddenly, Jesus is gone again. It’s the roller-coaster all over. For a symbolic forty days our Risen Lord has been with us, talking, teaching, reminding, preparing, testing, to make sure we’ve got it. But on the forty-first day, while we were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of our sight.

Did you notice how often Jesus is being “lifted up” in the Scriptures, either figuratively or literally? On the cross. Into heaven. If we’re really alert, and depending on how well we know our Bible, we’ll remember that the prophet Elijah was also “lifted up into heaven” at the end of his life, while his protégé Elisha watched. It’s the Bible’s way of saying that neither Elijah and Jesus ever really died, that they are still alive. They’re just, gone.

So on one hand, the whole point of the Ascension story is that once Jesus was resurrected, he never died again. He just went up into heaven. Where he continues to live today. (Are you up there, Jesus?)

On the other hand, the more important point of the Ascension story is that Jesus had to go away. Why? (Anybody remember?) So that the Holy Spirit could come. Listen again to Jesus' words to his disciples: "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 you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." He's talking about Pentecost, which hasn't happened yet, but will. And which we will celebrate next week out at camp (and which I wrote about in the June Messenger which just came out).

But first, the disciples will have to just stay in Jerusalem and wait. It's crucial they learn how to wait. Just as we must learn to wait. The Holy Spirit will come. Peace will come. It's just a matter of when. In God's time.

Actually, there's an even more important point to the Ascension story, namely that Jesus' baton has been officially passed. Just like the prophet Elijah's mantle was passed on to Elisha. It is now our turn, our job to write the rest of the story. The bad news is, Jesus is gone. We are left to continue in his place. The good news is, he will not leave us alone. We will receive his Spirit, to give us what we need, when we need it.

For now, with the disciples, we wait. Patiently or impatiently, or better yet, some of both. Which reminds me of one of my guitar teachers, and something he told me a long time ago. He said that if I wanted to get better as a guitarist (which of course I did), I needed to be both patient and impatient. I've often pondered how well that applies to life in general, and especially, the life of faith.

Now that I think about it, maybe that's the most important point of Ascension story. We must learn how to be both patient and impatient. That at least is today's lesson. Next week, out at camp, we'll learn about Pentecost.

Amen.