

## **“Waiting in Jerusalem”**

Acts 1:1-11

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We had been enjoying a full day of listening, in person, to a nationally acclaimed Christian poet. There was much to wax poetic about. This retreat, which I attended last Monday, took place at the tail end of the April Noreaster we all endured. There's nothing like being at beautiful Camp Johnsonburg -- even when snow is cascading down on spring blossoms. I spent a good bit of meditative time staring out a window at a porch rail, where an empty clay pot sat catching frosty condensation.

The poet, J. Barrie Shepherd, consistently exhorted us to pay careful attention to the details of our world and our lives. In particular, he wanted us to focus less on sin and suffering and more on seeing signs of resurrection life. His words and his presence were encouraging and inspiring. Since he was the kick-off speaker of a two-day retreat, the tone was set for wonderful relaxation, contemplation, and creativity to the glory of God.

What began, though, as a time for spiritual renewal amidst snow startled tulips and invigorating retreat leadership, suddenly shifted into a time tattooed with spiritual crisis. Word found us about the massacre at Virginia Tech. Shock, tremendous sorrow, and considerable anger pulsed through our fellowship of retreat participants; the senseless slaughter of utterly unsuspecting victims; the evil act of someone so spiritually and mentally lost to all human compassion and hope. In light of that breaking news, the exhortation to seek out signs of resurrection suddenly felt an overwhelming task given the gravity and idolatry of such violence asserting itself against innocent lives. How were we to interpret this latest proof that grave sin and suffering still very much exist in this world in light of our joyful, confident proclamations of Christ's victory on the Cross?

Well, Monday evening, around the fireplace, we did what so many other Christians could only do ... we followed our Lord's instruction to wait in Jerusalem.

Not, of course, the actual place in the middle-east. We needed to return, spiritually speaking, in deep unperturbed prayer, to the faith home of our Israelite ancestors and the early Christians. We needed to visit the holy city of our collective souls where all of God's promises for deliverance and restoration shine like street lamps illuminating even the darkest, grimmest, gut-wrenching avenues of the world.

Jerusalem. Everything that Jesus had his very first followers experienced together served the purpose of getting them all to Jerusalem. Every step was in accord with God's great plan to restore His chosen nation of people to their capital city, the literal and symbolic center of their identity, worship and community life.

The great prophet Isaiah had communicated, long before Jesus was born, the divinely authored itinerary for accomplishing this. We know this holy itinerary both through the sixty-first chapter of Isaiah and through the Gospels. We know that Jesus dutifully followed it – that he proclaimed and personified good news to the oppressed; bound up the wounds of the brokenhearted; proclaimed liberty to all held captive by enslaving thoughts and social systems; comforted all who mourn. That he worked hard to make people understand they can be as strong and mighty as oak trees, a forrest of faith rightly keeping God's glory on display. His whole mission was to promote the day when all sin and sorrow would be vanquished and the victory of holy love and merciful justice would prevail.

That day arrived when *he* arrived -- rag tag, waffling disciples in tow -- in Jerusalem to show the amazing grace of God's love to the world by voluntarily suffering crucifixion. For many dark hours over a three day span, everything joyful and miraculous, heart warming and heart wrenching that had happened to get Jesus and his disciples to a skull encrusted hill in Jerusalem seem to be in vain. The restoration and rebuilding project of the Temple seemed to come to a complete and utter and bitter halt.

Until, praise God, Jesus, the very cornerstone of that sacred sanctuary clearly rejected by its builders, revisited the world. After all the divine drama they'd been through, it's no wonder then that when the disciples were blessed to see the risen Christ they asked, "Lord, is *this* the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?" They had had so much hope for the fulfillment of ancient prophecy. They then saw this hope crucified on a cross. But then it sprung vividly back to life. Surely this delightful response to all they'd experienced was the sign of all signs that God was truly putting an end to evil.

Jesus did not reply, however, with a jubilant "Yes! This is it folks! Now is the time!" He replied instead with a very stern statement – "It is not for you to know the times or periods my Father has set by his own authority."

Can you imagine the disappointment? They needed this resurrection to be a final resolution, not yet another step in the plan of salvation. They needed to know that all oppression, suffering and deep sorrow, all sin-fueled insanity, was going to

finally disappear from the face of God's creation. They needed to know they had not been misled. They needed to know what we've all needed to know, once again, this week ... that what was accomplished by God through Jesus on the Cross really and truly and fully makes a difference. If God's kingdom was truly at hand, as Jesus' beating back death sure seemed to inaugurate, then when would the rubber of belief really hit to road of reality?

After reminding them they should not attempt guessing at God's eternally timed intentions and actions, Jesus then told them it was time for his body to leave the earth and for the Holy Spirit to descend and continue the work of holy and human reconciliation. Victory over sin had indeed been secured powerfully and personally by God. The divine truth prophesied 500 years earlier by Isaiah had indeed been fully manifest on earth in the person of Jesus. But this was not yet the final consummation of God's plan of salvation. That would need to wait upon Jesus' promised return.

At this point, the community of very first Christians had a choice. They could focus on the frustration of feeling like their hopes were some holy yo-yo, going up and down and up and down from the hand of God. In this frustration they could then choose to abandon the whole thing, turn away and deny that God really had a plan, or that God existed, even.

Or they could choose to continue their putting their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. They could live out this trust by doing as he instructed them – *by staying close to Jerusalem*. Staying close, that is, to the worshipful center within each of them and within their community where God's promises are proclaimed and interpreted again and again, where the vision of heavenly life is always front and center, where the power and promise and permanent saving grace of the Cross anchors all reality. This choice meant committing to further adventures on the path of prayerful patience and to prayerfully active service according to God's every-unfolding will in this world.

We know, praise God, this very first community of post-resurrection people chose to continue their trust, obedience and service to Jesus Christ. And that they did not have to go it alone, for Jesus, though departed in the flesh, was indeed very much alive among them through the Holy Spirit, continuing His ministry of holy reconciliation via their steadfast faith.

What I experienced Monday evening around the fireplace in Camp Johnsonburg's dining hall was a reaffirmation of that commitment to continue onward made by those first century Christians. We too did not choose to believe that Jesus and

his journey to a cross in Jerusalem was a sham, that sin and suffering and truly despicable evil acts will ultimately have the upper hand on God Almighty. We chose to lament the horrible event of Virginia Tech, as well as every other historic atrocity we had in our minds and hearts, but to do so while standing together upon the cornerstone of Christ, in our corner of the holy city that is God's dominion. In doing so, we experienced the Living Lord prompting us to respond to this massacre with more prayer for discernment about what we need to do as ambassadors of the Gospel.

If you've been watching the news, you'll see that we certainly weren't the only ones refusing to let another attack of evil crush our Christian hope, our steadfast determination to continue on in the light and truth of the resurrection. Come what may, the Cross stands tall in the Jerusalem Temple that is the Church. Amen.

Prayers of the People:

We praise you, God our creator, for your handiwork  
in shaping and sustaining your wondrous creation.

We especially thank you for  
the miracle of life and the wonder of living . . .  
particular blessings coming to us in this day . . .  
the resources of the earth . . .  
gifts of creative vision and skillful craft . . .  
the treasure stored in every human life. . . .

We pray for others, God our Savior,  
claiming your love in Jesus Christ for the whole world  
and committing ourselves to care for those around us in his name.

We especially pray for  
those who work for the benefit of others . . .  
those who cannot work today . . .  
those who teach and those who learn . . .  
people who are poor . . .  
those among us who are sick and suffering,  
the church in persecution. . .  
all victims of violence.

Our hearts, most especially, are with the families of those whose loved ones died this week on the campus of Virginia Tech. Hold them all close to You, Lord Jesus, granting them, in time, healing and hope. May your grace and forgiveness illuminate the deepest darkness of grief.

God our creator,  
yours is the morning, and yours is the evening.  
Let Christ, the sun of righteousness,  
shine forever in our hearts  
and draw us to the light of your radiant glory.

We ask this for the sake of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of all, who taught us to pray ...