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In the Book of The Acts of the Apostles, we see how the work Jesus began was transformed from a small group of Jewish followers largely from the region around Galilee into the beginnings of a global movement. I think Acts is one of the most enjoyable books to read in the Bible. It begins in Acts 1 with a group of about 120 disciples waiting and praying in Jerusalem. By the end of Acts, the Gospel has been shared with people from as far away as Africa, all around the Mediterranean basin, and as far west as Rome in Italy. How was this possible? How did it happen? That is the story Acts tells.

Two thousand years and over a billion followers later there can be a sense of inevitability about the growth and spread of Christianity. History can feel that way. Whatever has happened can seem like, *“Well, of course, that’s what happened,”* as if there was no alternative. However, it’s rarely the case that something was so sure that there was no alternative way that things could have turned out. There’s a book by Erik Durschmied called *“Hinges of Battle: How Chance and Incompetence Have Changed the Face of History.”* It’s about how some of the most famous battles in history that had significant implications for the future hinged on a very small action, mistake, miscommunication, or misunderstanding.

The 120 followers of Jesus praying and waiting together in Jerusalem had no idea of what the future held. With Jesus gone, they’re still reflecting on all that happened and they had questions. They believed Jesus was the Messiah, yet he’d picked the man, Judas, who had betrayed him to the authorities. Then Judas had killed himself. What did it all mean? How were they supposed to do what Jesus asked? This is the setting for today’s scripture from 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.”*

There are some words that just seem to go together like, *“Hot Fudge... Sundae.”* Or, *“Peanut butter and ...jelly.”* *“On your mark, get set, WAIT!”* Does that sound strange to anyone? The words don’t seem to go together. At times, like the character Inigo Montoya in *The Princess Bride*, I’m not very good at waiting. When we want someone to wait, we say, *“Hey, wait a second or a minute.”* That encourages thoughtful reflection doesn’t it? We never say, *“Wait an hour, or a day or a week or longer.”*

In Acts 1:4, Jesus *“ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but **to wait there** for the promise of the Father.”* Then Jesus tells (1:6-8) his followers they’ll be his witnesses beginning right where they were

in Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. So what did they do? Did they create a strategic plan with appropriate objectives and measurable goals for sending people north, south, east, and west? Did they pack up and hit the road with the gospel? Nope. They went back to the upper room and devoted themselves to prayer and waited for God's power. After the crucifixion and resurrection, after 40 more days of training from the risen Christ, the believers are given a task (being witnesses for Jesus to the ends of the earth) which by any standard is seemingly impossible to contemplate much less attempt. And, Jesus has left them on their own and they're praying together.

The next time you're feeling overwhelmed by things to do, think about this: Jesus gave the responsibility for evangelizing the entire planet to 120 people, fewer people than in any of our worship services this morning. Look around the room; can you imagine the task of evangelizing the world resting solely on our shoulders? Can you feel the weight of that responsibility? How would you like to do that? Can you see yourself making out your to do list tomorrow morning? *"Finish project for Friday. Clean house and prepare for guests. Shop for groceries. Get kids after practice. Witness for Jesus in my town, on Cape Cod, and to the ends of the earth."* Better plan on a late dinner; it could be a long night. Christ's command to be his witnesses carries with it a sense of importance that would motivate many of us to get busy and say, *"On your mark, get set, go!"*

But when activity seems most urgent, the Bible reveals that sometimes our most urgent activity may be to **wait and pray**. In Acts 1, gathering to wait and pray are depicted as two of the primary activities of a faithful church. Waiting upon God in prayer is not something we do as a luxury when we have a slow day or week, if we ever feel we have one of those. We wait upon God and devote ourselves to prayer when we find ourselves in a similar position to that of the disciples – **facing overwhelming responsibilities and knowing we need the power of God in order to go forward**. Spiritually speaking, the way forward, especially in a crisis, is on our knees. That may seem slow at first, but the power that comes when we wait and pray lifts us up and carries us forward in incredible ways when we rely on God's strength, leading, and wisdom and not our own effort and busyness. While the Psalms and the Prophets speak often about the value of waiting on the Lord and for the Lord, waiting is a terrible burden for us impatient folks who live in the age of instant everything. There is more to life than increasing its speed. Waiting is one of the tough tasks of the church. But if we don't wait upon God, then God will have to wait for us. Think about this with the family of Jesus.

Mary the mother of Jesus is an interesting example. The angel Gabriel appeared to her, gave her stunning news about being the mother of Christ and then she had nine months **to wait and pray** and see what God would do (Luke 1:26-38). Sure enough, she gave birth to a son whose birth announcement was conveyed by angels (Luke 2:13-14). When some shepherds informed Mary of all they had been told about her son, she **"treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart,"** (Luke 2:19). Mary waited for her son's birth. Then she had to wait for him to grow up to see who he would become. Before she knew it, Jesus was twelve years old and stayed behind in Jerusalem so he could sit in the Temple listening to the teachers and asking them questions. When his parents finally located him after three frantic days of searching, his mother said to him, (Luke 2:48-51) *"Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety."* He said to them, *"Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"* But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. **His mother treasured all these things in**

her heart.” That could have been my Mother’s Day message – *“Even the mother of Jesus had her moments.”*

Mary was waiting on God, waiting on her son to see who he would become, then when Jesus began to preach, teach and heal, he stressed out his mom again. Mary and Jesus’ siblings became so concerned for his sanity and safety that they came to take him home away from the crowds who were flocking to him (Mark 3:21), *“When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.”* Only after the crucifixion and resurrection do Mary and the others begin to more fully understand. Mary waited upon God, but God also had to wait on Mary as awareness dawned on her over time. **Often God doesn’t act in our lives in a powerful way until we’re willing to wait, pray and obey** as Mary did. I have no doubt that Mary’s presence and experience over the previous few years was a great encouragement to the other believers gathered in Jerusalem.

However, even when told by the Lord himself to wait and pray, our human urge is that *we have to do something* and Peter, who frequently behaves impulsively, decides while they’re waiting that they should do something about the leadership gap on their team. Judas must be replaced because Jesus had told the apostles they would sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel. The leadership circle must be complete, but notice what they do. Instead of waiting and praying for a period of time until they received what Christ called, *“the promise of the Father”* before making that decision; they take it into their own hands. (Acts 1:23-26) **“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.” Matthias may have been a wonderful guy, but he’s never mentioned or heard from again in the New Testament.

I believe the apostles failed to wait and pray long enough to see what God was going to do. They chose the qualifications, *“It has to be an old timer who has been with us from the beginning.”* They narrowed the choice to two people, then they prayed, *“Lord, you know everyone’s heart. **Show us which one of these two you have chosen.**”* The rest of the Book of Acts makes a strong argument that the Lord didn’t choose either one of them. When the time was right, the Lord chose Saul of Tarsus who became known as the Apostle Paul. The apostles cast lots, an old way of trying to discern God’s will that more closely resembles something that goes on at a casino than a prayerful discernment of God’s will. Sometimes the church can try to force plans rather than waiting on and responding to the leading of the Spirit. We need to be careful that we don’t become so busy, active and process-oriented that we fail to take the time to listen to the voice of Jesus and to discern the leading of the Spirit. Sometimes we as individuals can take things into our own hands too soon because we act before waiting and praying.

For the 120 disciples in Jerusalem or in our own lives, waiting and praying can be key elements in receiving the power that Jesus promised. Praying together can create unity among people. Fresh vision comes through prayer. The strength to care comes through prayer. The discipline of prayer enables us to experience the power and love of God. Listen to what Carlo Carretto writes about praying.

“If you don’t pray, if you are not searching for a personal relationship with God, if you don’t stay with God for long periods in order to know, study, and understand God, little by little you will start forgetting God, your memory will weaken, you will no longer recognize God. You will not be able to, because you will no longer know how to love. The proverb, “*Out of sight out of mind,*” is true not only of people it is terribly true about God, too. For example, if a man calls his fiancée to tell her, “*I’m sorry, this evening I can’t come, I’ve got so much work,*” there is nothing wrong. But if it is the thousandth time he has made the same call, he has not been to see her in weeks on the excuse of work or outings with friends, it is more serious – rather it is quite clear: this is not love. Because the lover is capable of overcoming all difficulties and discovering all strategies necessary to meet his soul’s beloved. So it is better to get clear with ourselves what our relationship with God is. Have you not been praying and seeking God personally because you don’t love God, or because you have no time?”¹

In a crisis, people sometimes say or feel with an air of resignation, “*Well, all we can do is pray.*” Another way to look at it is: prayer is an act of love in which we seek the power and presence of God who loves us in ways we don’t fully appreciate or understand. Without waiting to pray we may move too quickly and miss God’s path, as the apostles did in naming Matthias rather than waiting to see God reveal Paul. Without prayer there may be a great deal of activity and busyness in our lives or our church, but is it the activity that the Lord desires? When activity seems most urgent, sometimes our most urgent activity may be to wait on the Lord and pray. The way forward may be on our knees. On your mark, get set...wait...and pray.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection:

1. How well do you handle waiting? How do you typically respond when you need to wait for something or someone? Does it make a difference if you expect to have to wait or if you’re surprised by the need to wait?
2. How do you think other people would describe your ability to “wait well?”
3. There are times when we feel the need to act urgently when in fact it might be wiser to wait and pray. Do you resonate with that statement? Have there been times in your life when you responded, reacted, or replied urgently or hastily and then regretted it? What happened?
4. Does your speech, behavior and attitude tend to be more or less Christ-like when you take some time to wait and pray before responding to a person or a situation? Why do you think that is the case?
5. Why is taking time to pray both individually and in groups make such a difference in our lives?
6. What might have unfolded differently in the early church if they had prayed and waited a little longer until they received the “power from on high” that Jesus promised?
7. If you’re in a small group, close by having each person share one thing they’re “waiting on” and pray for one another.

¹ Carlo Carretto, from *The God Who Comes*, quoted in *A Guide to Prayer for Minister’s and Other Servants*, page 380.