

Sermon preached June 1, 2014
Ascension Sunday
Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

There's a story about a man who was speaking frantically into the phone. He cried out to the doctor, "My wife is pregnant and her contractions are only two minutes apart!" "Is this her first child?" the doctor asked. "No!" the man shouted, "This is her husband!"

I'd like to say a few words about limbo. And, no, I'm not talking about a Caribbean dance! And I'm not talking about the old Roman Catholic theology of babies suspended between heaven and hell. I'm talking about limbo as a time for us when we are neither here nor there. A time when we are neither one thing nor another. Transitional, liminal. For instance like waiting for a baby to be born, or when we are between two jobs, or when we've sold one home, but not yet moved into another. The ambiguity of limbo can be a very uncomfortable place. We prefer to know where we stand. Today's readings are about the disciples entering a period of limbo. A period of waiting.

The gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are written by the same person. Acts just picks up where Luke leaves off and that's what our readings are, the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts and they both tell the story of Jesus' ascension. You see, Jesus rose from the dead 40 days before and has been hanging out with the disciples, teaching them about the

Kingdom of God, the scriptures, and what to expect in the future. Then he gives them some unexpected news – he is leaving! They are surprised! Didn't he just come back to them after they thought he was gone forever through death? Now he will leave again. But Jesus tells them not to be distressed; the Holy Spirit will be coming in 10 days. She will guide them into all truth. Jesus then blesses the disciples and floats up to heaven to be with the Father. He has ascended. So now the disciples are in limbo. Jesus is gone, but the Holy Spirit hasn't arrived. They've got 10 days of an interim period to process what has happened and prepare for what is to come.

In his book *Transitions*, author William Bridges speaks about this kind of limbo - he calls it the “neutral zone.” It is the place where one thing has ended, but a new thing has not yet appeared. Bridges points out that every transition has three places: an ending, the neutral zone, and a new beginning. People are usually very uncomfortable with that middle part. When we are in it we usually either reminisce about the past or try to hurry up to the future. Think of a young woman who has just ended a long term relationship with a young man. She may lament that it is over and spend her time reliving her days with her beloved before the breakup, or she may rush forward and try to enter a new relationship as quickly as possible. Bridges calls it “the traps of fast forward and reverse.”¹ He suggests that there is value in the middle. There is much to be gained by sitting in the neutral zone and using it as a time to learn and grow. It has a perspective on our life which can't be found anywhere else and it allows us to learn from the past and prepare for what is to come.

¹ Bridges, William, *Transitions*, p. 143.

Jesus goes over these very three steps with his disciples. First there is the ending. The books of Acts says that he prepared the disciples for the ending by spending those 40 days after his resurrection speaking to them about the kingdom of God. In Luke he “opened their minds to understand the scriptures.” Now that he has resurrected, he can explain to them what his life, death, resurrection, and ministry were all about. Who he is and what had just happened. And he lets them know it will soon end.

Jesus then explains to them what is going to happen in the future. He tells them that the Holy Spirit will come upon them. The Spirit will lead them into all truth. They will then become witnesses to what they have seen and proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus to all nations. They have a job ahead of them.

And both Luke and Acts tell what the disciples did in limbo, in the interim, in the neutral zone. They were between the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry, but before the time of the appearance of the Holy Spirit and what we traditionally call the birthday of the church. In Acts it says, “[Jesus] ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father.” In Luke it says, “And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.” In the neutral zone the disciples waited and they worshipped.

There is no use looking back to the glory days of Jesus. In Luke the two men in white robes scold the disciples and say to them, “why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” In other words, don’t hang onto the past, move on. At the same time, there is no sense in trying

to build the church before the arrival of the Holy Spirit. The disciples have to sit in limbo and wait. But it is an active waiting. They worship. I suspect they also pondered the information Jesus told them as well as prepared their hearts for what is to come. But they don't try to hang on to the past or make the future come more quickly. They sit in the present. They grow in wisdom and rejoice. They are fully present to the moment. They are fully present to God.

Before our wedding day, several people said to Bill and me, "Be sure to stop several times during the day and pay attention to what is happening around you. Remember that moment. The rest of the day goes by in such a blur that you will forget it all if you don't." I've heard this advice given to other brides, and there is real truth to it. In fact, I think it can be applied to the rest of our life as well. We often spend so much time either dwelling on events of the past or anticipating the future, that we are no longer present to the present. We are either obsessing with an argument we had with someone the day before, or looking forward to the day when we will finally retire, that we completely miss out on what is happening right in front of us.

For those of you who may have read the spiritual writer Eckhart Tolle you may recognize this observation. Tolle writes and speaks extensively about what he has called "The Power of Now." Being fully present to the moment. For instance, how many of you are fully present to this sermon and how many of you are mentally preparing your shopping list? It's easy to get distracted and mentally wander off to the past or the future, no matter what we are doing. But life is not a series of memories of the past or hopes for the future. Life is what is happening now, at this very moment.

I suspect this tendency to not be present to the “now” is one reason the neutral zone is so challenging to people. If you are between one thing and another, and your “now” is rather ambiguous and scary, it is natural to want to avoid it and either lament the loss of the past, or try to hurry up and get to the future. But Jesus advises his disciples to be present to this time of limbo. Not to dwell on the past, or make the Holy Spirit come faster, but wait in Jerusalem. To actively wait. To worship. To rejoice. To be present to the moment. To know that what will happen, will happen, in its own sweet time. Because the “now” is also the place where we encounter God.

We in the West seem to have difficulties being in the present. To let go of trying to force a future. How often have I tried to wrestle with what is, trying to make things turn my way, instead of letting things take their course and being patient with the timeframe?! This is not to say that we shouldn't make plans or consider what we can learn from the past, but to recognize that life is found in the present. We seem to credit ourselves with a lot more control over our lives than we actually possess. Limbo then becomes a gift, because we so totally don't have control over what is happening. If your company transfers you to another city and you have yet to settle in, you are in limbo, in transition. You aren't in your old home, yet you haven't adopted the new place as home either. You aren't one thing or another and there is nothing you can do about it. You can only be present to the moment. In fact, we must be present to the moment in order to move beyond it.

Jesus and the disciples model for us a great example of recognizing limbo and embracing it. Living in the moment, whether it is uncomfortable or not, and being fully

present to it. Being present to their lives and to God. Waiting, actively waiting, for the Holy Spirit, so that when the time comes, they may be able to enter their future, the church's future, with wisdom and grace.

Amen.