

5 June 2011
Easter 7

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Living In-between”

Text: Acts 1:12-26; 1 Peter 4:12-19; 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

Alleluia! Christ is ascended! [*He is ascended indeed! Alleluia!*]

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The reading that we heard from the book of Acts today tells us what the Church did in the time between Jesus' ascension into heaven (which we celebrated Wednesday night) and the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (which we will celebrate next Sunday). Jesus told them to wait in Jerusalem until they had been clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4). And so they were waiting. Ten days they waited. But it probably seemed longer, as each hour and day dragged by. Waiting isn't easy.

But waiting is the way of it with God. We want *what* we want *when* we want it - but God gives in His own time. He made Abraham wait 25 years for his promised son, Isaac. He made the people of Israel wait 400 years in Egypt before He brought them out. And He waited thousands of years before fulfilling the promise He made in the Garden - to send a Saviour to bruise the serpent's head. But those are not wasted years. God uses that time, working and preparing His people for the works that He will do. Work and preparation that isn't always easy.

Well, in comparison to all that, ten days doesn't sound too bad! But what was the Church doing those ten days, waiting in Jerusalem? The text tells us they were praying. And what were they praying? The psalms. The prayerbook of the Bible. That is what they had learned from Jesus. And from praying the psalms, the reading from Acts tells us that they hear of what happened Judas (Psalm 69:25) and they learn that another should take his place (Psalms 109:8).

They had undoubtedly heard these words before, but now, in Jesus, they heard them in a new way. And they were encouraged by them. For what a shock it must have been for them when Judas turned against Jesus, and so also against them. Judas who had been their close friend, and who had learned with them and taught with them and baptized with them and with whom they shared everything. They thought they knew him! Yet here in the psalms they learn that while *they* were shocked, this was no surprise to God. Here it had been written a thousand years

earlier. Jesus had indeed gone just as it was written of Him.

But then they also learned that another should take Judas' place. The work would go on. Their office as apostles would go on. God would not give up on them. Though Judas betrayed, Peter denied, Thomas doubted, James and John sought glory, and they *all* struggled to believe - God was going to use them. Though the men who fill it are sinful and flawed, the Office of the Holy Ministry would go on. And so they fill the office left vacant by Judas. Or perhaps better to say, they turn to God in prayer to fill the office. And the lot fell to Matthias. And once again, the Word of God is fulfilled.

But it's not just the Church then that lived in an "in-between" time - so does the Church now. For we live in the time in-between Jesus' first coming in the flesh and His second coming in glory. And just like with the Church then, it isn't an easy time. There is waiting. There are trials and struggles of faith. There are shocks and doubts and fears. We are betrayed and we are betrayers. And, as Peter told us today, there is ***your adversary the devil prowling around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour***. That someone was them. And that someone is you.

Oh, you don't see the red-suited guy with a pointy tail and pitchfork - he is much more subtle than that. He bears his fangs *at you through others* - when those you thought you knew and could count on shock and hurt and betray you. He bears his fangs *through you at others* - when you devour someone's reputation with gossip, chew people out because things weren't going your way, or bear your fangs to get what you want. And seeing all this sin and hurt and betrayal in the world, in the Church, in others, and in ourselves, it can seem that perhaps God's not waiting at all, but has, in fact, left you and forgotten about you and turned His back to you. And with such thoughts, the devil is seeking to devour your faith and, like Judas, tempts you to seek another way than God's way.

So what's a Church to do? Well, the example of the apostles is a good one. That in this in-between time, we stay in the Word of God and prayer. For it is the Word of God that will sustain us in our faith, even when faced with the attacks of the devil; his assaults both from without and from within. It is the Word of God that keeps us, encourages us, strengthens us, and teaches us that though we are often shocked and dismayed, our Lord never is. And He is working for us and for our salvation, even, as Peter says, through ***fiery trials***.

And today, in the Word of God, we heard something else: **we heard Jesus praying for us**. Jesus, who Himself was betrayed, who knew something of fiery trials, who knew how hard this in-between time would be. He prays for those who have been given to Him by the Father - His disciples then, and His disciples now.

For the hour had come for Jesus to go to the cross and be - as He says - *glorified* there. That we don't usually think of the cross as glorious is because we have been blinded by the false glories of this world - glories that don't last and aren't really glorious at all. Riches come and go, power fades and fails, popularity and pleasure can vanish as fast as dew in the sun - but the glory of the cross is everlasting, for it is the glory of God's everlasting love for sinners like us, that would cause Him to come for us and die for us. And, in fact, Jesus' time on the cross was His "in-between" time - when the holy and perfect One hung in-between two criminals, the sinner in place of us sinners; and when the One who was both true God and true man hung suspended in-between God and man, in-between heaven and earth, the sacrifice for sin to reconcile us to our Father.

And precisely because of Jesus' in-between time on the cross, because of His death and resurrection, we are kept and protected in our in-between time. And for this Jesus prays. He prays that the fruits of His cross be manifest in you. He prays that the Father might keep you in the baptismal name that has been washed over you and into you. He prays that you may be one with Him and with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. He prays that you may be made holy in the Word which forgives your sin and declares you a child of the heavenly Father. And His prayer is heard. These are the very blessings you have received in Christ and from the glory of His cross.

How else to explain how the Church is still here? The Church which is the object of the world's wrath and the devil's attacks; the church *by schism rent asunder and heresies distressed* (LSB #644 v. 3); the church which is the victim of our own sinful failures. Surely not because of us, but because of Jesus, there is a Church and will always be a Church, where the glory of His cross is still proclaimed, the wonder of His forgiveness is still given, His Spirit is still bestowed, and His Supper still feeds and strengthens. For though He is now ascended, Jesus hasn't stopped working for you, and is still praying for you, taking all our weak and faltering prayers and voicing them to His Father. And in Him, your prayers are heard.

Perhaps it does not always seem like it. Life in this in-between time is tough and seldom seems to get easier. But here again, the example of the apostles can help us, and remind us that the Word of God and prayer **aren't really what we do - they are what does us**. For through the Word the Spirit strengthens, gives, encourages, and comforts. And when the trials and struggles and hurts and betrayals of this in-between time drive us back to the Word of God and prayer, then we are blessed. For in the Word of God we find Jesus, and we find that while what is happening to us may shock us, it is no surprise to God.

In fact, we heard today (again, from Peter): ***Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were***

happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings . . . because in Christ's sufferings we find His glory. And sharing in His sufferings, we too are glorified. As we forgive and are forgiven. As we lay down our lives for others. As we pray for them. As we serve and love - even our enemies and those who persecute us.

All of that usually doesn't feel very glorious, which is why others, instead of saying, *Oh, what great love you have!* often say, *Oh! What big teeth you have!* And so we need to repent, which I'm sure the disciples were doing an awful lot of also in their in-between time. But we do so - we *always* do so - not uncertain of our Father's forgiveness and love, but absolutely sure of it! Absolutely sure, because of the cross; because His love and forgiveness is His glory; because for this Jesus is still praying for us. That we would know and receive **and trust** His forgiveness and love. For only with such trust will we love and forgive others.

And so now, to us, as we live in this in-between time and await Jesus' second coming - we who *have been* clothed with the Holy Spirit in Holy Baptism - to us, Jesus says, **don't devour one another, devour Me**. For now by eating His Body and drinking His Blood, we receive His power from on high brought down to us here, and are strengthened to go out from this place, into our callings. Not to make a name for ourselves, but bearing His name. That may mean suffering for a time, but be not afraid. The One in you is greater than the one in the world (1 John 4:4). And He who has gone to prepare a place for you (John 14:3) will keep you, until He comes again for you. When, finally, all the Word of God will be fulfilled, and *we like saints before us will see Him face to face* (LSB #644 v. 5).

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.