



Sermon Transcript

May 24, 2020

God's One Story of Redemption

Prayer Precedes Power

Acts 1:4; 1:14

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on May 24, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Steven Durgin. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text

Acts 1:4

⁴ And while staying^[a] with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me;

Acts 1:14

¹⁴ All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.^l

Introduction

I'm hearing from a lot of folks that they feel they're in between things. There's a sense of life being put on hold. We are waiting. Watching the news. Doing our part. But waiting in many respects, to see people again, to gather fully as a church, to see jobs come back. I myself have thought of this time as a kind of limbo, awaiting resolution. In that mindset, I confess that, at times, I don't think of myself as doing God's work here and now. But God has not stopped working.

I think it would help us to pay attention to a time when the disciples were in between things. They were waiting. And perhaps, like me, they were tempted to wait passively. But they didn't.

I have the sweet pleasure of preaching today in between Ascension and Pentecost. What is the Ascension? The day that the risen Jesus went up, to return to his rightful place, reigning with God the Father.

What is Pentecost? Well, in the acronym CASKET EMPTY, which is a tool we are using to remember the storyline of the whole bible, we are on the Letter P which stands for "Pentecost." Before Jesus had left his disciples he told them that he'd be going away, but that afterward he would send us a helper, the Holy Spirit. Pentecost is the day that the Holy Spirit of God came, being poured into the lives and hearts of those who believe in God, and giving them new life in Him. In other words, Pentecost is the very first day that there were such a thing as Christians. It is the beginning of the Church.

Can you imagine being there as a disciple? You've seen Jesus of Nazareth. You've walked with him on the hot-summer Mediterranean coasts, eaten dinners with him--kale, dates, olive oil, lentils, and baked fish. You've heard him teach and it's melted you, you've watched him heal people, give sight to the blind, heal diseases like leprosy, and make folks who are paralyzed get up and walk, you've even seen him raise someone from the dead, named Lazarus. And then, with so much left unsaid, and with questions still burning in your heart, your friend is forcefully taken from you by Roman soldiers after dinner one night. Shortly afterwards, the religious leaders accuse him, and you feel powerless to watch as the man who loved you more than anyone you've ever known is beaten, mocked, and executed on a criminal's cross.

But three days later, this same Jesus is seen alive by Mary Magdalene. And then he appears to you, in the flesh, and the last thing he tells you is this: "This is what is written:

The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised, but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” And the last thing you see of Jesus is him lifting his hands to bless, and as he blesses you, Luke writes, he is taken up into heaven. And you and your dear friends beside you do what anyone in their right mind would do--you worship. You shout and you dance and you praise God. And you go to the temple and you keep praising God. But perhaps, after you're worn out from partying, you pause for a moment, and you wrestle in the quiet of your heart, and you wonder the same thing many of us are wondering now: “what's next? Where do we go from here?”

And the image of your fellow disciple Thomas fills your head, and you recall that he asked Jesus those same questions: ‘Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?’ And then you can hear Jesus' words like it was yesterday, “I am the way. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. And really, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. *Because I am going to the Father. Because I am going to the Father.*” And those words echo in your soul. If I simply believe in him, I will do the works he has been doing because Jesus is going to the Father. Why does it matter that he went to the Father? What help is that to me? Wouldn't it be more helpful to have Jesus here?

He promised us that when he ascended to be with the Father that he would send us an advocate, a helper to be with us forever--who is called the Spirit of Truth. He promised that the Spirit would live in me, and would teach me all things and remind me of everything Jesus said to me. In fact, Jesus told us that it was to our advantage that he leave us. All of this can and will happen because Jesus ascended to reign with the Father and he's gonna send us the Spirit.

And as Luke begins his account of the beginning of the Church, he reminds us again of Jesus' last instructions to the disciples. Acts 1:4 reads, “Do not leave Jerusalem, but **wait** for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

The disciples were really in unknown territory, folks. They didn't have church history. They were it. The disciples were really in between things. They were in between the Ascension and Pentecost, between Jesus' earthly departure and the sending of the Spirit. One might say they were in limbo--an uncertain period, awaiting resolution. But they didn't sit on their hands, they fell on their knees. They didn't wait passively, they waited in prayer. Today I want you see a simple truth. It's nothing new. In fact it's as old as it gets.

In the Kingdom of God, Prayer Precedes Power

Jesus told the disciples, to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit, and he promised that in their waiting they would receive power, they would be clothed with power from on high, from where Jesus is.

And we see this right as Luke's account of how the Church begins. This book gives us a window into the lives of the people who were closest to Jesus and close to those who knew him.

And so the disciples hike back to Jerusalem from the hill known as the mount of olives, and they return to the room where they were staying. And Luke writes in Acts 1:14 "They all joined together constantly *in prayer*, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers."

What about you? Are you just waiting, or are you waiting in prayer? Because after this, God moves. Things happen. The kingdom advances. After prayer.

Acts 1:24	The apostles nominate leaders after _____. Then they pray again.
Acts 4:31 (23-24a, 31-35)	After the church is persecuted they ask God for boldness and growth in _____.
Acts 6:6 (6-7)	Before choosing seven more leaders, _____.
Acts 9:40 (40-42)	Before great growth, and signs and wonders, the church sought God in _____.
Acts 10-11	The gospel spread to a new people group, called the Gentiles, through Cornelius' faithfulness in _____.
Acts 12:12	Peter was released from prison through _____.
Acts 13:1-3	The first church planting team, Paul and Barnabas, were chosen and sent in _____.

Acts 14:23	New believers were set aside as leaders in new churches in _____.
Acts 16:25	The Jailer's household came to faith and followed Jesus after ____.
Acts 21:5	Before commending Paul to a dangerous situation and certain imprisonment for the sake of the gospel, _____.
Acts 22:17	For guidance as to future ministry plans, _____.
Acts 28:8	For more signs and wonders _____.

You want to see God's power displayed? It always shows up in the people who prayed. In the Kingdom of God, prayer precedes power.

One of the most important moments in my life, my personal Pentecost if you will, was just after a loss occurred in my life. I was going into my senior year of high school and found out that I was going to lose my youth pastor. It was painful for me, because he meant so incredibly much to me, and was such a spiritual mentor and a man of God in my life. His influence was so timely for me as a young man, that I could not get my head around the possibility of losing this minister in my life. But I got together with my bros. Joe Schuberth and Tom McCue, and we were talking about losing pastor Eric and we ended up waiting, interestingly enough, in the upper room of the Schuberth's house.

And I don't know who suggested it or if we just ended up doing it but somehow we all ended up praying on our knees, and Tom started crying out to the Lord and up to this point we weren't sure that he would decide to follow Jesus but in that moment he did. And to this day we refer to that moment as the "prayer canon" because it was as if Tom had energy mounting up inside of him and all of a sudden let loose a flood of realizations and affirmations of God and who he is and he confessed faith in Jesus. He confessed his sins, and then Joe and I start confessing our sins and repenting, and apologizing to Tom for the ways in which we're falling short of who we're called to be as men of God. And the next thing you know, we're all grabbing a piece of paper and essentially drafting a covenant together of how we want to live and how we want to help each other do that and we sign it and pray over it. I mean we're just talking about a couple of punk kids but I am certain and I was certain then that we were filled with the Holy Spirit. To this day it's one of the most important memories for me, it's something I look back on and cherish that gives me a sense that God is real, and that the same God lives in me today and that the best way to live in him is to pray. There were a ton of things we did wrong in that time of life, but one thing we did right. We prayed. And what came out of that wound of losing our pastor, was that all of us boys decided to step

up and follow Jesus more wholeheartedly and set an example for the other kids, because pastor Eric wouldn't be here anymore and we didn't know what was next. We didn't just sit on our hands, we got on our knees.

There's a hint in the Lord's prayer about where power is. It begins, "Our Father, who art in heaven." and it ends "Yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory." Amen. Of all the ways Jesus could have taught us to pray, he said that. Pray that. Why?

Because the most powerful thing in the world is a weak people completely dependent on God. How will God bring his kingdom on earth? How will he get done what he wants done? "Not by might, nor by power [referring to earthly strength], but by my Spirit, declares the LORD." And where is the Spirit? In the Church. In us. In you, if you believe.

Do you feel disoriented? A bit lost? You're not in limbo right now. What if you're exactly where God wants to be? And what if the best way to lay hold of this time in our life as a church is to pray?

There's a poster I remember seeing at the Schubert's house growing up. At the top it said something to this effect, "Do you seriously think God can't use you?" Noah was a drunk. Abraham was too old. Isaac was a daydreamer. Jacob was a liar. Leah was ugly. Joseph was abused. Moses had a stuttering problem. Gideon was afraid. Samson was a womanizer. Rahab was a prostitute. Jeremiah and Timothy were too young. David was a murderer. Elijah was suicidal. Jonah ran from God. Naomi was a widow. Job lost everything. Peter denied Jesus. The disciples fell asleep while praying. Martha worried about everything. The Samaritan woman had been with 5 husbands. Zaccheus was too small. Paul was murderous. And Lazarus was dead."

Come to God with your feelings, with your doubt, with your disqualifications. Bring God your weakness in this difficult season and he'll use it to show his power. Bring God your weakness because it's all you have. Bring God your weakness because it's all he needs. Because in the kingdom of God, prayer precedes power. The most powerful thing in the world is a weak people completely dependent on God.

What might happen if we get out of this pandemic having waited in prayer as opposed to having waited in passivity? If we want to see a church planting movement initiated, it will require God's power. God acts in response to His people's prayers. We know for certain that God wants everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). We know that He

will build His church (Matthew 16:18). We know that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us and will give us what we request (1 John 5:14-15). Therefore, we need to ask.

How can we act on this?

Application

You don't have just pray on your own. In fact, I'd like to invite you as a church family to consider three things.

First, join the movement to cover our state and our country in 24/7 unceasing prayer. Here's a video about how God has been moving in New Mexico recently and how that has spread across the nation.

*America Prays Video - Economic Revival in New Mexico

Our church has taken the first Wednesday of every month to fill up 24 hours of prayer for the good of Connecticut. On that first Wednesday we also gather together for prayer at 7pm.

Second thing, as a church, we have chosen to "wait" in prayer and fasting between the Day of Ascension and the Day of Pentecost. If you haven't started yet I'd encourage you to participate by clicking on the link in the chat or by calling the church office. If you do, you'll receive daily prompts for reflection on fasting and prayer, and you'll be joining us in seeking the Lord in a focused way.

The **third** thing is matter of your heart. Your posture. I was tempted, in thinking about application, to focus on what you would like from God. To ask questions like, "Where do you *want* to see God's power? In your marriage? In your family? In your health?" And then I was going to encourage you to bring a life of prayer to bear on those things. And that's not a bad way to think, but I feel we'd be missing something there.

I would like to end with a focus on what God would like from you and trust that if we pray to posture ourselves for whatever he wants from us, and seek first his kingdom, that we will be taken care of.

So my encouragement to you is to do as the disciples did and to wait in prayer for the work of the Spirit. And to be willing to be the answer to someone else's prayer. Be

willing to be sent. Be willing to be used by God even if you feel you have little to nothing to offer. There's no magic formula for walking by the Spirit. There's no secrets. God is not a system. He is a person. There's no life hack. There's just faith-filled, trusting prayer that places our weakness in the hands of a mighty God, who loves us, and shapes us, and sends us to bring his love to the world.

Do you feel like you're in limbo? Have you been doing a lot of waiting? That's okay. Do you feel powerless? Good. That's exactly where God wants you to be.

The truth is, life is NOT on hold. And prayer is the way to practice our powerlessness and prepare to be used by God in powerful ways.

Remember how the Church began. Remember how God's power was displayed after his people prayed together. It humbles us to fast and pray that we too might be used for the gospel. It causes us to believe, despite this challenging pandemic, that the same God who brought us this far will continue to build his Church, and even "the gates of hell will not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18).

Let's pray.

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COMMUNITY
GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Steve mentioned struggling with a sense of being "in limbo." Are there aspects of your life that seem to be "on hold" right now? How have you seen opportunity in this season where others see obstacles?
2. Pause for a moment together and consider the possibility that you are exactly where God wants you to be. What would this mean to you? How does it make you feel?
3. What are some ways that you'd like to make more room for God in your life? In your schedule? In your heart?

Taking It Home

4. Share with the group about a time that you prayed and saw God's power in response to your prayers.