

<Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10; John 17:1-11>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Risen One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

Have you ever found yourself on autopilot moving through life, or at least a small portion of it? I'm certainly not recommending such an attitude as we move through life - quite the opposite - but I would be naive to think none of us, myself included, have ever experienced such a phenomenon.

The concept of going through life, or even a small portion of it, on cruise control implies a dynamic of being distracted from what is actually going on around you, and it can lead to all kinds of difficulties. I once received a speeding ticket on the interstate because I was mentally on cruise control and driving at what I thought was the posted limit, except that I hadn't noticed I was in a different zone. In my state of not paying as much attention - being on mental cruise control - I hadn't noticed that the highway passed into a different speed zone, and sure enough, there was the trooper to remind me.

And for as much as it can create difficulties in the physical world when we move through a portion of life on mental cruise control, the ramifications can be even more impactful when that happens in our spiritual lives, because it leads us to completely missing the signs and the realization of God's Kingdom among us. And that is certainly one warning being offered to us in our readings this morning. These readings are an example, an offering of the dynamic between intention & presence against distraction & presumption.

First, the disciples, in The Book of Acts, are on the verge of taking on their new role as apostles. Next week will be Pentecost, and we will celebrate accordingly, but this week we find them on the mountaintop as Jesus gives his final blessing and then ascends into heaven. Before he departs from them, he answers one final question which burns within their hearts, "Lord, is now the time?"

"Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" "Is this the time when we see the prophecies fulfilled in the way we understand them? Is this the time when we can see the fruition of what we've worked for, and the end of our striving? Is this the time when all we yearn for will be realized?"

The disciples have followed Jesus and worked hard - they have learned at their Master's feet, they have witnessed miracles and signs, they have endured challenges and gone out on their own in ministry. They have carried the weight of generational hopes and expectations. And now, wonder beyond all other wonders, they have borne witness to not only the crucifixion and burial but also the resurrection. And as Jesus makes his departure, his ascension back to God after all the teachings and final exhortations, the disciples wonder if the kingdom will be realized, if they will be able to go into cruise control-mode and just work at maintaining the Kingdom of God, rather than building it. "Is this the time, Lord?" Will it happen now?

We can relate to this desire. The human psyche is wired to seek maintenance and homeostasis, to seek the status quo because we use such a framework to determine personal security. We want to feel as if we have “finally arrived” at the location toward which we journey. But the flip side of that coin is that we often jump too readily to such a presumption, and we overlook the work that still needs to be done, the work that still needs to be engaged, the work to which we are still called in faith. It’s what leads the newly-christened apostles to ask this question of Jesus, and to hope that he will answer in the affirmative.

But even as their eyes are upon him, even as he begins to ascend to heaven, his response is neither ‘yes’ nor ‘no,’ at least not directly. Rather, his response is the invitation, the calling to fix their attention not on the hope of fulfilled realization and ensuing maintenance but on the on-going living out of the Kingdom reality. “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.”

In other words; ‘your hope will be realized in due time; even now you have seen it taking root and breaking into the world as you have known it. But in the meantime, continue in the calling to which I have set you.’

And then, immediately then, as if to reinforce and undergird this, two men in white robes appear and ask, “why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

And we get caught up on the last part of that statement, and we let our eyes - spiritually if not physically, and I am just as guilty of this as anyone - we let our eyes continue looking upward, distracted from what is around us, and we overlook the recall back to the “here and now” that is found in their initial question: “why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”

The unspoken statement in that question is, ‘remember your calling, and the work before you, until such time as he returns to you.’

Theologian Willie James Jennings, in his commentary on Acts, writes of this moment, “Watching Jesus and watching for Jesus was and is a significant temptation for his disciples. Such watching can easily undermine movement and easily undermine the priority of the journey...They could easily have begun to consider how they might mark the spot of his departure and forget his instruction given through the Spirit” (p19-20).

In other words, they could easily have shifted into spiritual cruise control and been distracted by the waiting, and no longer present to their calling or the leading of the Spirit.

Our calling is not to stand around searching the skies, but in the meantime to put our hands to the tiller. Our calling is not to be distracted in the watching for something we can’t determine and don’t know the time of, but to be present, faithfully and lovingly

present, here and now with the people who are alongside us. For in that is the fullness of God's Kingdom - the Kingdom for which we yearn and of which we dream - in that the fullness of the Kingdom will be realized.

Jesus speaks of this as he concludes his Farewell Discourse in John's gospel, speaking of the nature of the Divine Godhead in the relational dynamic of the Trinity - Father, Son, Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Jesus points toward the very heart of the Godhead, and in this, calls our attention back to what will constitute the fullness of God's Kingdom, the realization of God's presence: living into mutual connection and relationship with those around us. As Jesus points us toward the heart of God, we are then called to extend that relationship into the world around us. And we can only live into this when we are present and intentional, not distracted or presumptive.

When our attention is focused on something that is not the here and now, we miss the opportunity to be present, truly present, with who we are with, attending to what is truly needed, hoped for. When our attention is too focused on the future or on what we've missed or on what we expect, then we miss out on the opportunity of connection and being present.

Thankfully, we celebrate today one of the greatest gifts which invites us to be present, the gift and the joy of music. Music is an offering in and of itself which calls all who hear it to be present and attentive, both individually and together. We are unified in the music which we receive and participate in today, and this is not unique to this day alone. We give thanks that such a gift calls us to be mindful in the here and now, and to remember our common calling to look to the Kingdom of God being realized in and through and around us.

The temptation to be distracted from the work of our calling, to set ourselves on 'cruise control' will always be present. And while such temptation should not be confused with taking honest rest and seeking full renewal, we must also maintain the balance of working toward the Kingdom lived out in our relationships built with one another and others in our world. We cannot let the spectacle of watching the skies supplant the actual calling before us, and must always hold the tension of the hope we yearn for with the desire we participate in realizing. The music of creation surrounds us, and the calling of the Spirit echoes within us. Behold, the Kingdom of God is before us, awaiting us, inviting us further outward in faith. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*