***NOW WHAT?***

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Text: Acts 1: 12-17, 20-26

In just another week or perhaps two or perhaps a week ago, a host of graduates will walk across a stage before a crowd of classmates, family and friends, accept a diploma in recognition of the completion of their studies and walk off the stage into a new phase of life. At the same time some of the parents of those graduates will be contemplating that festive day as the beginning of a new phase in their lives as well: as empty nesters. And a handful of teachers will celebrate with those graduates and then join them in leaving behind the familiar pace of school life for a new life in retirement. This time of year is full of such celebrations and transitions and with them comes an oft-repeated refrain: Now what?

It is the same question faced by young couples as they celebrate their wedding and begin a new life as husband and wife, the same question raised by young parents with the arrival of their firstborn child, but it is also the question that haunts the worker who is handed a pink slip ending his job. It is the question raised by a surviving spouse when her mate dies, the question that crosses the mind of the patient who hears the doctor say that dreaded word: cancer, and the question that crosses the patient’s mind yet again when the chemo begins to flow. Now what? What will life be like in the days to come now that everything is not the way it has been? It is a question that is raised sometimes with great enthusiasm, sometimes with great angst, sometimes with great hope, sometimes with great doubt, and often with great uncertainty. Now what?

The disciples faced that question after Jesus’ ascension. They had just confronted that same question when Jesus was crucified, but their grief-stricken question had been answered then with the resounding good news of resurrection. In the presence of the risen Lord they found renewed strength and hope, the assurance that they were not alone and with him by their side life would be okay. But then he left them, ascending into the clouds and leaving them alone once again with the words of two angelic figures echoing in their ears:

*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*.

With no indication as to when that would be or what they were to do in the meantime, the disciples waited and wondered, and what they wondered was: Now what? What will happen next, and what do we do in the meantime?

Back at the turn of the millennium some folks thought the world was going to end, and so they sat around gazing up at the sky, waiting and watching for an end that never came – or if it did we missed it! That is one way to wait for what’s next: sit back and do nothing, wait and see what happens. Another option for the disciples might have been to scatter, to go their separate ways – some back to fishing, some to return to their homes, some to find another messiah to follow. But the disciples neither sat idle nor scattered. According to the passage in Acts that we read this morning, that whole group of disciples who had followed Jesus, men and women, family and friends gathered together and devoted themselves to prayer. Faced with an uncertain future, they prayed. While waiting for what God would do next, they prayed. And I wonder: for what did they pray?

Luke doesn’t tell us, but author Anne Lamott suggests that in the end there are really only two prayers anyway: “*Help me, help me, help me.*” and “*Thank you, thank you, thank you.*”[[1]](#endnote-1) I suspect that the prayers of those disciples included both those prayers – thanks for the risen Jesus and for days spent with him and for the insights gained from him and for the hope he offered to them, and then a plea for divine help for the challenges that lay ahead. Without Jesus by their side and with no clear successor to him, the disciples needed divine guidance as they tried to decide what to do next. They had been followers, not leaders, for the past three years, and even following had been a challenge from time to time. Now they had no one to lead them, no one to stand up and tell them where to go or what to do. They needed divine wisdom, insight, courage, strength, patience and peace – all those things which all of us need in the face of life transitions.

Which leads me to wonder: do you pray for those things – or for anything? When life changes and you contemplate the future, do you turn to God and devote yourself to prayer as the disciples did, or is God irrelevant to your decision? Do you pray or do you just wait and wonder what will happen next? A proverb suggests that prayer was never intended as a labor saving device, as an alternative to action, but it may well be key to discerning faithful action and a clear direction. Prayer is conversation with God, and as such it includes not only our cries of “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! and “Help me! Help me! Help me!” but also some silence in which to listen for God’s reply, some time to be still and know that God is God and you are not and that is a good thing!

If you don’t believe that God hears your prayers, then you may deem any prayer to be a waste of your time. But if you believe that what Jesus says is true, that God not only hears our prayers, but invites us to pray, urges us to pray, then that conversation with God may be a vital step in discerning your future. If then you pray, for what should you pray? Phillips Brooks, author of that much-loved Christmas carol, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, offers this advice:

*Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger persons. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers but for powers equal to your tasks.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

What Brooks is suggesting is that we pray for God to empower us, to grant us gifts to be the people God wants us to be and to do what God wants us to do, whatever that might be. All those gifts which might be helpful in times of transition – wisdom, insight, courage, strength, patience and peace – seem to be appropriate pleas for God’s help in the face of new challenges. We only need to ask!

The disciples asked; they prayed, but they also took action. Perhaps they knew that proverb about prayer not being a labor-saving device or had seen the forerunner of that sign in front of a Fairfield church some years ago:

PRAY FOR A GOOD HARVEST BUT CONTINUE TO HOE

For whatever reason, they continued to pray, but they also went about some necessary work. Peter took the lead, for Peter was never one to sit still or stay quiet. While no one had been designated by Jesus to be the leader in his absence, Peter stepped up to suggest something they might do while they waited – choose someone to take Judas’ place as one of the twelve. There was no requirement that there be twelve disciples, no process established to choose a replacement, but the disciples must have been aware that Jesus chose twelve of them to follow for a reason – perhaps hearkening back to the twelve tribes of Israel – and so they determined that a successor to Judas should be chosen.

Unfortunately, they had no Presbyterian *Book of Order* to guide them, so the disciples had to improvise; they determined qualifications – someone who had been with Jesus from the beginning and someone who could be a faithful witness to Jesus’ resurrection – and two nominees fit that bill: Matthias and a disciple who was variously known as Justus, Joseph and Barsabbas. (Since they couldn’t even agree on his name you kind of suspect he isn’t the one to be chosen!) Then they prayed, and this time Luke tells us the content of their prayer:

*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…*

They asked God to choose and trusted that God would lead them to that choice. Two weeks ago we chose Sarah Wolf to be our Associate Pastor, but breaking from that early tradition of casting lots, we instead took a vote, trusting that God would lead us to choose the one God might call here – and it was Sarah. Like our votes that day, the disciples believed that God’s will would be reflected in their process, casting lots, and so when the lot fell on Matthias, he became one of the twelve.

I wonder how the church and world might have been different had a woman been chosen to be that twelfth disciple. Women were there at the beginning; they were the last at the cross and the first at the tomb. They had proven to be bold witnesses and faithful followers of Jesus, more faithful than some of the twelve men Jesus had originally chosen! But in a patriarchal world in which men’s voices carried significantly greater weight, a world in which a woman could not even be a legal witness, a man was chosen: Matthias. Perhaps God discerned that the world was not yet ready for a woman in that role; or perhaps the disciples were deaf to that divine possibility. In any event, Matthias was chosen, and that is the last we hear of him in Scripture.

Thankfully, since that time disciples of Jesus have discerned God’s call to men and women alike to serve in leadership in the church. This Mother’s Day is a day to give thanks for our mothers, but perhaps we might also give thanks for those church mothers who have nurtured faith in us, proclaimed the gospel to us, prayed for us, and led us on faithful paths across the years! For the difference those women have made in our lives and in our life together, we say: Thank you, Lord!

*Thank you! Thank you! Thank you*! but also *Help me! Help me! Help me!* Those are our prayers in varying words and forms and circumstances. As you face whatever changes are coming your way this day or in the days or weeks to come, perhaps you might follow the example of the disciples. Do the necessary things that need done day to day (like choosing Matthias), but also devote yourself to prayer. Every day, come what may, pray! Amen

1. Martin Thielen, *Searching for Happiness*, Westminster John Knox Press: 2016, p.107 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Phillips Brooks quoted by John Sonnenday in the newsletter of Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean, VA, May 10, 1999 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)