

Acts 1:1-11

what to do in the interim?

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When theologian Karl Barth was a young pastor serving a small congregation in the village of Safenel, WWI erupted. He described the war as THE event that shattered all his illusions about human progress. Once his illusions were shattered, including his theological convictions about human possibilities, Barth turned to what he called "*The Strange New World of the Bible*." Immersing himself in this strange new world, Barth allowed his life and imagination be informed by scripture rather than forcing the Bible to conform his ways of understanding. For Barth, when we allow scripture to interpret our lives rather than the other way around, we discover the astonishing reality of an undomesticated, God. Our imagination is expanded by possibilities we never dreamed possible.

I say all of this as we ponder the ascension of Jesus while his disciples stare into heaven dumbfounded. This event shatters our categories of understanding. It is futile to squeeze it into a tidy box of plausibility. Like God, the ascension will bust all your boxes. But rather than dismiss it, how about asking about it in light of God's story with us? In this way we enter the strange new world of the Bible where our lives are transformed by the knowledge of God's ways among us.

Jesus' ascension marks the reality he is with us solely by faith through the living presence of his Spirit. You could call it the inaugural of the season of the Holy Spirit. The season in which we live our lives day-by-day. Barth looked upon the ascension as the time of Word. "It's the time in which the company of believers - the Church - is united with Christ only in faith and by the Holy Spirit."

Then he went on to say what may be obvious but nevertheless worth mentioning because of our particular circumstances at Saint Mark. "It's the **interim time** between the earthly existence of Jesus and his return in glory." That means, said Barth, "it's the time of great opportunity, of the task of the church towards the world. **In short, it's the time of mission.**"

We live our lives in a interim time, when the Church glances back at what has been, while looking forward to what is coming.

What is the great spiritual danger facing the Church in an interim time?

Nostalgia! There is always some period of time known as "the glory days" for which people pine away for its return. Remember how it used to be when there was more of this and less of that? You fill in the blank. The Church in the 21st century, including our church, always has a choice to make. Do we live by

nostalgia for what used to be and then arrange our activities, our budgets, our plans for the return of the glory days? This is the path of least resistance, the easy soul-numbing path of nostalgia.

I travel around a lot of churches as part of my ministry with the Presbytery. Looking back to what used to be is the all-too common practice. **But what used to be is not going to be again. Ever.**

Just to be clear: remembering and appreciating what has been and learning from it is a good thing. That's why we study history. It's also why the long story of God's people in scripture is filled with remembrance what God has done in previous generations. After all, when we gather each week at the Lord's table, in much the same way as the Jews look upon the Exodus story, believers-in-Christ are remembering and reenacting what the Lord has done for us.

Remembrance is a spiritual practice that leads to wisdom. Nostalgia is a recipe for paralysis and decline.

This is what the disciples discovered as they were staring into heaven. It was not backward in nostalgia they were instructed to look - but forward to the task of being witnesses to Christ's present power through the Holy Spirit.

The in-between time is a time of witness, of mission and of proclamation. Neither pining for what once was yet never will be again, nor speculating endlessly on what is coming, the Church in the in-between time remains open to the opportunities that God gives it through the presence of the Holy Spirit. This is why, as Shelby pointed out a few weeks ago, speculating about the Second Coming of Christ is a pointless exercise.

So if nostalgia and speculation are the practices to be avoided by the Church during the interim what are practices to be embraced?

Watch and wait, says Jesus. The most demanding spiritual practice may be watching and waiting. It's deep listening prayer that doesn't come easy for us, especially when you are driven to do something - even anything.

So while Barth is right to declare the in-between time a "time of mission and opportunity". It is wise to add the core practice of prayer - of listening to God - watching and waiting for the signs of the Holy Spirit at work among us. To watch and to wait in listening prayer, as Jesus instructed, is a way of not putting the cart before the horse.

Watching, waiting, praying, listening: these are the core practices that enable the Church to **do mission**, in the power of the Holy Spirit who is always present and always coming.

Now to the One who is able to do far more than we can ask, or think or even imagine, to God be the glory, forever and ever. Amen.