

Left Behind
Acts 1:1-11
May 3, 2008

Perhaps you remember the movie of a few years ago called *Home Alone*. A large extended family is traveling to New York to spend the Christmas holidays. In their rush to get so many people out of the house in order to get to the airport on time, they fail to recognize that they have left the youngest member of the family behind soundly asleep in bed. He is home alone for the Christmas holidays, until finally his parents recognize his absence and frantically find a way to get back home. In the meantime, the child finds plenty of ways to entertain himself and protect the house from burglars!

In this morning's reading from Acts, it is Jesus who departs and leaves his disciples behind. According to Luke, Jesus has been around for forty days since his Easter resurrection. He has appeared to them several times in order to solidify their belief in his resurrection and continue shaping their discipleship. Now the time for his ascent to heaven has come.

The disciples are a bit anxious. They ask, "So Jesus, is this finally the time when the Romans will be quashed and the land restored to our own people?" It isn't the right question. The query focuses on the good old days of the past and looks to a better time in the future; it fails to recognize the opportunity of the present moment. Jesus tells them that the timing of God and the completion of God's reign is not for them to know. In the meantime, they have other responsibilities to fulfill. In their stunned stupor following Jesus' disappearance into the cloud, they end up seemingly paralyzed with their necks crooked gazing upward. Two angels come to arouse them from their daydreams and call them back down to earth where they belong. "Why are you just standing there? Get on with it. Do what he told you to do. You are left behind for a purpose."

Jesus' first instruction to the disciples left behind is to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father. Wait. Stay here. Don't rush away in fear or distress. Don't turn away from all that you have been taught. Wait upon God to offer the promise. Don't take your own initiative. Carefully listen to God's prompting for your next steps.

Reading further in the story we learn that the disciples do gather in Jerusalem in an upstairs room, perhaps where they had celebrated the last supper with Jesus. There they "constantly devote themselves to prayer." Theirs is not a passive waiting for God to dramatically send a messenger with an action plan. Theirs is an active waiting, placing themselves in God's presence, intentionally seeking to know God's desire for their lives.

Waiting on God leads to the second prompt from Jesus: receive the gift of power. The disciples are not to head out into the mission field under their own power and control. They are to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the present tense of God, God with us now. When we listen in prayer, God's Spirit infuses us with direction and energy for action. If we set out solely on our own power, it will ebb. But fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit, the momentum for mission will be sustained as long as God desires.

Indeed the book called the Acts of the Apostles tells the story of the disciples witness to all the places Jesus commanded them to go: to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. Their travels are enabled by God's presence with them. Their ministry is not easy; they

face resistance and persecution, but they persevere because they are invigorated by a source more powerful than themselves. Instead of burning out of their own resources, they are ignited with an enduring flame.

Having waited to receive the gift of power, the disciples are ready to fulfill the final instruction of Jesus: be witnesses of the wondrous work of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Through your witness may that presence of Christ be at work in the world, fostering forgiveness and reconciliation. Tell the story of Jesus and his love as you have experienced it. Point beyond yourselves to Jesus, to what God has, is and will do through him. The story isn't about you! It's about Jesus.

We all move through seasons in life, times of transition when one aspect of life is left behind and we move on to another. Sometimes we suffer the loss of a loved one, a job, a physical ability which forces change upon us. Other times we sense that it is time for a change and we make the choice to leave one ministry behind for another.

Jesus' words to the disciples are instructive for us as we find ourselves in seasons of change. Wait upon God in prayer to guide us toward our next ministry. In addition to assessing our gifts, skills, and desires, listen for God's prompting. Is this new adventure something to which God is calling me?

Discern the energy that drives you forward. Are you moving ahead solely on your own power, or is the Holy Spirit empowering you to move ahead?

Seize the fresh opportunity to witness to God's love as you know it through Jesus Christ. Sometimes we are called to difficult situations because we represent for others values of compassion and ethics of justice that are needed. Sometimes I have found myself called to be a beacon of light in a conflicted group, to model healthy relationships that foster healthy community. Oftentimes just our caring and inspiring presence can speak volumes to others. There are times when we are able to share the source of our positive qualities, the faith that sustains and guides us. Whether it be through our presence, our leadership, or our words, we are called to be witnesses to the power and love of our God.

One student was somewhat restless and bored. He went to his teacher asking, "What's there to do?"

The teacher took Joel to a convalescent home not far from the school campus. Inside there were lots of aging people lying around in beds in old cotton gowns staring at the ceiling. (Senility doesn't always come from the aging process. It sometimes comes from not being loved, and not feeling useful.) Joel and the teacher walked in and looked around. He said, "What'll I do here? I don't know anything about gerontology." The teacher replied, "Good. You see that lady over there? You go over and say, 'Hello.'" "That's all?" "That's all."

Well, that woman must have been sent by God. Joel went over and said, "Uh, hello." She looked at him suspiciously for a minute and then said, "Are you a relative?" Joel answered, "No, I'm not." She said, "Good, sit down, son."

He sat down and they began to talk. Oh, the things she told him. This woman knew so many wonderful things about love, about pain, about suffering, even about her approaching death, with which she had made peace. But no one cared enough to talk to her.

Joel started going once a week to talk with that lady. Pretty soon that day began to be known as Joel's Day. He would come for a visit and all the patients would gather.

Wonderful things began to happen on Joel's Day. The greatest moment in that teacher's educational career came when he walked out on campus and there was Joel, like a Pied Piper, with about 30 little old people following him across the grass to a football game in the coliseum!ⁱ

Jesus left his disciples behind on purpose. Their purpose is to continue the ministry he began and to expand it beyond his own circle of influence. The book of Acts tells how some of the disciples followed his command and witness to their personal experience of Jesus. In response the followers multiply, for God's grace and love are contagious.

In prayerful waiting upon God, we are guided to fresh ministries and empowered to serve. We are not left alone. The Spirit of God is with us offering the power of touch, listening, sharing, and loving. We are granted power to effect change, to transform lives, to make a difference. Today we are those left behind to follow in pathway established by Jesus and the church. We are left behind in order that power of God's love might be made known through us.

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