

A few years ago, we decided to buy a second TV. I thought it would be nice for my husband, John, to be able to watch all his favorite sport shows, which apparently are on year-round now, and all his other favorite shows, like the Seinfeld and Big Bang reruns that he watches over and over and over and over, without feeling guilty, just because it happens to mean that I am never able to watch any of my favorite shows. So, we decided it was time for a second TV.

We get the new TV, and I am excited to try it out. I should mention that our new TV operates with an antenna, it doesn't have a cable box. And it requires using three different remotes for which there are no written instructions. So, I am already way over my head, because I can't even identify which three remotes I am supposed to use. I find what I think are the correct remotes, and start pressing different buttons, switching back and forth between the remotes, trying to figure out what I am supposed to do so that I can watch my TV show. And time is passing. I'm five minutes into my show, then ten. And all kinds of different screens are popping up. I accidentally change the TV's date and time. I just wanted to watch my show, but technology has been changing so rapidly, I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do. I knew what to do with a TV connected to a cable box. But what was I supposed to do, now, with this TV that uses an antenna and three remotes? This was all new territory for me.

What was I supposed to do, now?

That must have been how the disciples felt in our Acts text. What they faced was all new to them. What were they supposed to do, now? Jesus had given them a commission, packaged in a promise, and ascended into heaven. How can you wrap your brain around that one? What exactly did it mean to be a witness? What would the Holy Spirit's empowerment be like? Would they even recognize it? And Jesus was going to return like he left. When would that be? What did it all mean? They were in uncharted territory. What were they supposed to do, now?

Today we celebrate the Ascension of our Lord, and enter into the time of the "not quite yet," the time of pause, prayer and preparation between The Ascension and Pentecost. The time of waiting.

Throughout his ministry Jesus had instructed his disciples about the Kingdom of God. But the disciples still had a lot of questions, and a lot of preconceived notions and opinions, and a lot of nostalgia for the glory days of the Kingdom of Israel. They ask: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the Kingdom to Israel?" They still seem to be impatiently looking back, while Jesus is looking forward to something radically new. Jesus had come to initiate a revolution, but it was going to be a qualitatively different type of revolution than the disciples had previously known or experienced. It was a revolution of grace. And the disciples would be helping to write the next chapter of the story. But first they must be made ready.

Is prayer important?

In the Book of Acts, which chronicles the acts of the Holy Spirit, the constant references to prayer might provide us a clue regarding its importance, and a clue about how ordinary, often bumbling, confused, and

far from perfect human beings could find their own stories intertwined in Jesus' ongoing story of redemption. We also see the importance of prayer in Jesus' ministry. Especially before major decisions and junctures in his life, Jesus would spend significant amounts of time in prayer.

Different seasons, changes in circumstances, call for different focuses of action. For the disciples, the time after the ascension would be a time of waiting and prayer. A time of "constantly devoting to prayer." This time of pause and prayer in the upper room was important, because it brought them unity, clarity, and alignment with God's will.

Lest we forget, there had been competition, jealousy, mistrust, and jockeying for position among the disciples. There had also been discord between the disciples and Jesus' brothers who were less than supportive of Jesus during his earthly ministry. There were cast outs and people on the margins that Jesus had healed that the disciples weren't quite comfortable with yet. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Peter had even denied Jesus. Thomas had doubted. There were trust issues, tensions, and residual criticism as they gathered together as community.

One reason prayer is important is because prayer changes us.

Our unity was so important to Jesus that Jesus culminates his prayer to his Heavenly Father in our gospel reading this morning by praying for our unity. Even as he faced his own suffering and death. His heart's desire is that together, as community, we would experience a oneness like Jesus has with his Heavenly Father.

Jesus knew that the church was going to struggle with this one. Historically the church hasn't done a very good job at it. But it's important, isn't it. God made us to be interconnected. We were made for one another. We need each other. The disciples' time of pause, prayer, and preparation helped draw the fledgling community together in greater unity.

Their time in the upper room also brought the disciples greater clarity, and alignment of their hearts with God's heart. Prayer is about relationship. Spending time in prayer draws us closer to God and helps bring us clarity about who God is. The One who was, and is, and is to come. And as we grow increasingly clearer about who God is, we begin to pray out of God's heart, and God's interest, not our own. We start identifying where God's will has looked suspiciously like our own. We begin aligning our will to God's. Soaked in prayer and scripture, the disciples were being made ready for the next mighty movement of God.

Same for us, too.

As we learned at the annual meeting, Good Shepherd is embarking on a time of pause, prayer, and preparation as we undertake the strategic planning process. The strategic planning process will help answer the question, "What are we supposed to do now?" What does it mean to be a faithful witness in the uncharted territory of our changing times, in the new frontiers and religious landscapes we face? We will seek unity, clarity and alignment with God's vision and mission for us in this place, in our world, today.

It will be a time of reflection and examination. A time of deep listening. A time of discernment about our strengths and weaknesses. A time of

soaking in God's word, and being open to the movement of the Spirit. It will take work. It will take patience. It will take your commitment. Everybody needs to be a part of this process. We are one. You can begin your time of preparation now by picking up a strategic planning booklet and beginning to work through it.

Christ's ascension reminds us that his work is not finished. We've entered a new chapter in the unfolding story of God's grace, a chapter that God wants us to help write. There's lots of work to be done. We might even have a sense of urgency about it. But we ought not rush ahead of God. Ultimately, the process recognizes what the disciples in the early church recognized. What God is calling us to do will be beyond our own abilities and efforts. And this is where it gets really exciting. Because God gives us a promise. God will be our help. And I can't think of anything better or more exciting than that. Amen.