

WHILE WE ARE WAITING

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Acts 1:1-14

May 17, 2026

Waiting! Every day we engage in the act of waiting, not just once but numerous times. We wait for the coffee to finish dripping in the morning. We wait for red lights to turn green, for slow traffic to move faster, for phone calls to be returned, for service people to show up, for the doctor to see us, and for test results to come in. We wait to purchase tickets for a show, to be seated at a restaurant, and to check out at the grocery store. We wait for clothes to finish drying, for dinner to finish cooking, and for rain to stop. There are those who wait for their next meal not knowing whether there will be one; they wait for medicine not knowing whether it will come in time to save a child; they wait for help, for relief, for hope to be realized.

Whether we like it or not, we humans spend time waiting every day. Some of that waiting may involve mindless standing or sitting. Of course, many of us have come up with ways to help us wait – and thanks to our handy cellphones there are plenty of options. We can catch up on the news, listen to music, play games, do wordle, stream a show, shop on-line at a favorite store, text a friend, and even read the Bible. Waiting might often be considered a waste of time, but it can be purposeful and productive. We might even consider keeping our cellphone in our pocket or purse and instead use our waiting time to breathe and think deeply, to refocus our mind, to think through and work out a problem, to meditate and pray, and perhaps even to work on building up the spiritual gift of patience within ourselves since it seems to be in such short supply these days. In multiple ways, the act of waiting can have purpose – a fact that we are all going to try and remember that the next time we are sitting in a huge traffic jam.

In the first chapter of Acts, we find Jesus' disciples engaged in this common human experience of waiting. It was forty days after Jesus' resurrection and he was giving his disciples final instructions. Jesus told them "*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*" (Acts 1:8). Immediately after saying this, Jesus was lifted up and out of their sight. The way the church has often described this happening is *Jesus ascended into heaven*. As the disciples stood there stunned and looking up "*two men in white robes*" suddenly appeared and basically told them it was time to stop looking up, to refocus their attention and to do something. So, the disciples began their "Sabbath day" walk which is about a half mile from the Mount of Olives back into the city of Jerusalem. Jesus had directed them to be his witnesses, but they weren't quite sure how to do it, and they were definitely not ready to follow through with it.

At the time of Jesus' ascension, we are told that he had about 120 followers (Acts 1:15). There were thousands more who had seen Jesus and who had heard bits and pieces of his message, but there were only 120 truly committed followers. And of these 120, it is very unlikely that many if any of them had ever

been outside the narrow confines of Palestine. Since there were about 4 million Jews in Palestine at that time, that means that fewer than 1 in 33,000 were Jesus followers. Those are not very good odds, and yet, this very small group was told not only to evangelize Palestine, but to evangelize the world. It was an awful big job for so few, and I imagine they were feeling more than a little overwhelmed and fearful about the task. Such a task would require many of them to not only leave their homes, but to leave their familiar communities as well as the boundaries of their country. It would require them to go to people who did not look and think and believe like they did. It would require them to face hostilities and to even risk their own lives. There was no question about it, they needed help. As they waited for the promised help of which Jesus spoke, they did what faithful people have always been encouraged to do as an act of openness to and preparation for God's direction, they prayed!

Those first followers didn't dash off to Jerusalem and start preaching on the street corners. They didn't immediately inquire into the purchase of property and head up a capital funds campaign for the purpose of building a place in which to gather and worship. Instead, they "were constantly devoting themselves to prayer" (Acts 1:14). Those disciples gathered as a supportive community and together they stood, sat, knelt and laid on a dusty, hard Jerusalem floor for 10 days as they prayerfully sought the presence and power of God's Holy Spirit. They didn't know how it would happen or what they would feel, but Jesus had told them that they needed the Holy Spirit to do what they needed to do. In the difficult and dangerous years ahead, the Holy Spirit would help them remember and cling to their faith that Jesus is alive, victorious and sitting on the right hand of God the Father. The Holy Spirit would give them power from beyond themselves, the kind of strength and wisdom that was needed to move forward with the seemingly impossible task of taking Christ's Gospel message to the world of that day.

People of faith never wait passively for God to come, because passive waiting is not productive waiting. People of faith get ready for whatever lies ahead by praying. Through prayer people of faith become spiritually ready to receive God's vision and directives. The directives are ones that only God gives, because it is only by God's Spirit that we can accomplish them. For example, Jesus said, "*Love your neighbor as yourself*" (Matthew 19:19). Jesus said, "*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*" (Matthew 5:44). Apart from God's help, we cannot even begin to do such things on our own. The same is true when it comes to being able to effectively witness to our faith. To accomplish God's directive of witnessing, God's people need Holy Spirit power. So, while we wait for the Spirit to inspire, empower and lead us today, we also pray.

Is there anyone here today who does not believe in the power of prayer? Is there anyone here convinced that prayer makes absolutely no difference in your life and in the world? Our faith and the example set by Jesus who regularly made time to pray reveal the importance of prayer, as well as the power that is unleashed through prayer. And yet, despite what is likely a general consensus that we believe in prayer, does our daily life practice reflect this belief? How

much time and attention do you and I give to prayer? We know that our busy lives prevent us from praying the way we should. We know that our unfocused and distracted minds prevent us from engaging in focused, serious prayer. One of the faith disciplines we have most focused on in the Wesley Faith groups that I've led over the past seven years is that of prayer. Prayer is essential in our walk with Christ and for our openness to God, and yet, it can be so very difficult for us distracted human beings to engage in regular, serious, and transformational prayer. Perhaps it's also true that a part of us thinks that if we invest too much of ourselves in prayer God might just expect more out of us. And if we don't want God to expect more, then keeping our distance might seem like the way to go.

Clearly, there is an important personal dimension to prayer as it offers us the opportunity to connect one-on-one with God. Through Jesus' own example we see that private, personal prayer is important time with God. But we also see in today's passage the importance of community prayer. It's in a community setting that the disciples prayerfully prepare themselves for the coming of the Spirit. They prayed together just as they would need to stand together to be a powerful, world-transforming witness. Prayer is the stance of the community of faith as we discern God's instructions, as we wait for Holy Spirit power, and then as we act by going where God sends us and doing what God wants us to do.

I think the real challenge for most of us is not our basic belief in the power of prayer, but in whether our lives personally and our life as a church community regularly and effectively bear witness to our belief in the power of prayer? Do we have a heartfelt commitment to prayer? Have we been "constantly devoting" ourselves to prayer as we seek the next step, and as we wait for the unleashing of God's power? As we prayerfully wait, might we dare to imagine, dare to envision what the unleashing of God's power within and through each one of us and this church community might look like?

Today's passage attests to the importance of a prayerful focus when waiting and preparing to receive God's power so that we might do something new and different than what we have previously done. In order for us to discern God's vision, to be open to God's leading in new directions, to learn how to tell and live out the story of faith in today's world for the purpose of making and maturing disciples of Jesus Christ, prayer is not simply a first step, it is an essential part of every step that needs to be taken. So on this May Sunday in 2026, the Sunday before Pentecost, what we see are coming changes that will impact this church and affect each one of us. For a moment, let's consider the coming changes, purposeful waiting, and why we should all be praying.

Personally, I am waiting and preparing to retire and move. I am prayerful amidst both the uncertainties and the excitement I feel regarding this next stage in my life. I am prayerful that God will lead me to new opportunities to serve and minister in Christ's name even as I look forward to spending more time with my grandchildren. For you as members of this church, you are waiting to say "goodbye," but you are also waiting to say "hello and welcome" to a new pastor and his family in August. You know that family recently experienced the tragic, heartbreaking loss of their 9-year old son, Sam. While you are waiting for pastor

Harlen, his wife Madeline, and his daughter Marta, I encourage you to pray for them. This coming Wednesday would have been Sam's 10th birthday; I think every single one of us should commit to praying for the Rife family on Wednesday. In the days ahead, I also encourage you to pray for yourself and this church as you seek guidance in how you might best welcome, love and care for the family once they arrive. And then after they arrive, keep praying for God's Spirit to lead and empower your new pastor as well as this congregation to lean into the new and faithful possibilities that come with a pastoral change. I believe this church, the broader community as well as the world are waiting to be blessed by your prayers and your spirit directed acts. I am grateful for the power of prayer, and I am hopeful for the ways in which each one of you and this church will continue to be faithful, bold, and relevant disciples of Jesus Christ.

Prayer and Holy Spirit power were absolutely essential components of the church's birth, and they have also been at the heart of every Christian revival of faith ever since. Can your prayers be counted on as we wait for the unleashing of God's Holy Spirit power upon us and for the fulfilling of God's purposes through us? If we as individuals and as a church are to be a part of something spiritually significant and life-transforming, it will happen only as we pray for God's Spirit and then faithfully follow the Spirit's leading. Today, on this Sunday before Pentecost, we are directed by Jesus to be his witnesses. I have no doubt that God has something new, exciting, and impactful in mind for all of us, so let's be prayerful, receptive and ready to jump on board as God's Spirit moves us.

Let us pray... Come Holy Spirit, renew and lead this your church as you empower each one of us for the task of bearing witness to Jesus Christ here in this town and even to the ends of the earth if that is where you want us to go. Amen.