

**THE IN-BETWEEN TIME**

**CALL TO WORSHIP: Isaiah 51:1-9**

*"Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD:  
Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn;  
look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth.  
When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many.  
The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins;  
he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD.  
Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing.  
"Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: The law will go out from me; my justice  
will become a light to the nations.  
My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring  
justice to the nations. The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm.  
Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like  
smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies.  
But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail.  
"Hear me, you who know what is right, you people who have my law in your hearts:  
Do not fear the reproach of men or be terrified by their insults.  
For the moth will eat them up like a garment; the worm will devour them like wool.  
But my righteousness will last forever, my salvation through all generations."  
Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days  
gone by, as in generations of old.*

**OPENING PRAYER**

God, you call to us through the words of Isaiah, to strengthen us, to remind us that although the world may seem as though it has gone mad, you are still in control. In tumultuous times like these it is important to remember who we are and where we came from.

We sit here in this sanctuary this morning, heads swirling with the currents of our times, and you remind us of what is important, of our value, of our worth. We sit here, almost 2500 years after Isaiah wrote those words. How many empires have survived as long as our faith. It is good to remember that there is a rock to cling to when the tides seem to engulf us.

Forgive us for forgetting who you are. Because you do not intrude in our lives but await our invitation, we can imagine that you are not there, but you are, waiting for an opportunity to fill us with your Spirit. So dear LORD, this morning we invite you into this Sanctuary, into this body of your people, into our hearts. Fill us with the presence of your Holy Spirit and remind us that your name is...I AM!

**SCRIPTURE READING: Acts 1:12-26**

*Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city.*

*When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.*

*In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) and said, "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus-- he was one of our number and shared in this ministry."*

*(With the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out.*

*Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)*

*"For," said Peter, "it is written in the book of Psalms, "May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it,' and, "May another take his place of leadership.'*

*Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection."*

*So they proposed two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias.*

*Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs."*

*Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.*

## SERMON: THE IN-BETWEEN TIME

I've usually brushed past this scripture passage on the way to Pentecost in chapter two. It never made any sense to me and I didn't particularly enjoy the discussion of Judas bursting open, and the casting of lots for the next disciple. I always thought that the disciples made the wrong decision with Matthias, and should have waited for the Holy Spirit before they chose him. And to be honest, I have always been a bit hard on Peter, feeling as though he was such an obstacle for Paul. So why, two weeks after we celebrated Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church would I choose to go back to *this* passage?

Because it's really the only record we have of the time before the birth of the church...the in-between time.

The first verses in Acts 1 serve as a bridge between the Gospel of Luke and as an outline of the entire book of Acts. After 10 days of Passover and 40 days of appearances and instruction by Jesus, he ascends and then we have this passage. This brief...strange passage...yet... a defining moment in the life of the Church. And particularly at this juncture in the history of our world, and the history of our church, it merits a deeper examination. Think of this sermon as Pentecost: The Prequel!

Anyone who tracks religious history can observe that momentous changes seem to occur in our judeo-christian faith about every five hundred years. The Davidic Kingdom, The Babylonian Exile, Jesus, Constantine, the rise of monasticism, the Protestant Reformation in 1517. They're called hinge times. If we're tracking this pattern at all we realize **we're about due**.

According to Phyllis Tickle, the author of *The Great Emergence*, it is important to remember that this is a religious pattern and the result of these hinge times is never the demise of a particular religion, but a branching out of something new and a reevaluation and correction of things that are out of joint with the old. However, each of these hinge times is preceded by a century or a century and a half of complete upheavals, particularly in the areas of how we perceive the world and how we perceive God, and one of the most dramatic hinge-times of all was transpired with the fall of the Jerusalem temple in 70 A.D.

The picture that Luke paints of the early Christian movement can be tracked back to his gospel, and the great joy that the apostles felt experiencing the appearances of Jesus. Yet the question arises as to was it really as simple as his brief description or was there more, much more involved in their process? "Oh the bible can be infuriatingly tight fisted with details?"\* What really happened during the gap between the ascendance of Jesus and the appearance of the Holy Spirit. That In-Between time when they must have been wondering how they would go on. Wondering what they were supposed to do while they were waiting for the direction of the Holy Spirit. ***Wondering if it all really happened.***

What fascinates me about this passage is that it addresses the problems the early church faced as it moved from being followers of Jesus to leaders of followers...two very different roles. The old is gone, but the new has not yet appeared, and there is a loss of confidence. A paralysis that comes from not having a clue and feeling overwhelmed by the vastness of an empty horizon. It is here that the fear sets in and whispers in our ears that we don't want to make a wrong decision, we would rather just sit and wait and be sure of our next move. But not making a choice is a choice.

If we think of the biblical texts as a window, we have options as to how we approach them. We can either focus on the glass itself with its fly specks, cracks and dust, or we can look through the window to the world beyond.\*\* But I would take it even one step further and suggest that upon closer inspection, we will see that these texts are not only a window to look out of, but are actually a French door to open, walk through and provide us with an experience of that world beyond that can be brought back to help us in ours. So this morning we're going to walk through the doorway of this piece of scripture and try to flesh out some of the missing details.

Luke was describing the continuation of ministry of Jesus by his disciples through the agency of the Holy Spirit. When Luke wrote both the gospel and Acts he would have been trying to work within the tradition of Judaism and makes many allusions to the Old Testament. Why? For a couple of reasons. Because remaining within the sect of Judaism allowed a great deal of protection and freedom within the Roman Empire. Because Christianity began as a reform movement within Judaism. Because in antiquity, anything new was suspect.

If you read 2nd Kings, Chapter 2 you will see that like Jesus, Elijah too was carried up into heaven by a whirlwind. Before he left, his disciple Elisha asked to inherit a double share of his prophetic spirit. Because Elisha was able to see Elijah depart in the chariot of fire it was granted to him. He then performed a miracle fully as impressive as Elijah's. The response of those who witnessed his power was that "the spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha."

In Acts vs. 12, the first thing that happens is that the community makes the Sabbath day's walk back to Jerusalem which is only a little over a half mile. They've been told to stay and wait in Jerusalem. A little bit of background here about why...Passover and Pentecost were two of three pilgrimage festivals that Jews were required to make every year. Passover commemorated the ten days that it took for the exodus from Egypt to Sinai and The Festival of the Weeks, Pentecost, the 40 days when Moses was on Mt. Sinai and came down with the Law. So the giving of the Holy Spirit would have coincided with the celebration of the giving of the Law by Moses and Jerusalem would have again been filled by Diaspora Jews and God fearers (gentiles who attended synagogues and temples).

So instead of disbursing and going back to Galilee, the apostles stay together until Pentecost. **This is key.** If they had all gone there separate ways, how long would it have been before they convinced themselves that *it didn't really happen?*

And they come together in prayer. And prayer permeates this whole passage. Through prayer, a leader emerges, Peter. It seems as though in prayer he caught a glimpse of what needed to be done next.

The line is, and “Peter stood up.” The significance of that line hit me hard as I meditated on this passage. I flashed back toward the end of Luke where Jesus warns Peter “Simon, Simon, satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” Peter adamantly protests and yet, just a few verses later when Jesus is taken to the house of the chief priest, Peter follows at a distance to the courtyard with the Pharisees the guards and the elders. And the line is “But when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, *Peter sat down with them.*” Then came his first denial.

Have you ever observed in the bible that evil is often pictured as something done by a group, sometimes by doing nothing at all. But the heroes of the bible are portrayed as one individual standing up. In the courtyard Peter laid low and became part of the group. But the prayers that Jesus prayed for him that his faith would not fail and that when he has turned back he will strengthen his brothers, seems to have worked. And this time, *Peter stood up.*

When we stand up we are visible, we can become a target, we will probably take the arrows for the group. We risk alienation by being singular in purpose. There is a word for this, differentiation. And all great leaders have this ability, to break from the anxiety of the group and by their very presence lead them to another place. To keep them focused on their values and beliefs instead of on one another. Peter emerges because he had the courage to marshal the group from inaction to action. And Peter’s response stands in direct contrast to the reaction of Judas. Two betrayals; two very different outcomes.

Peter saw that the group was broken. An assessment needed to be made about what was holding everyone back. Peter addressed the group’s anxiety by naming the problem...

*It was the empty chair.* You’ve been to dinners before where a family member was missing. They were supposed to be there, but they weren’t. The more time that passes, the more present the missing person becomes. It is very difficult to proceed with dinner. Even if the place setting is removed and the decision is made to continue without that person. The gap remains. The evening is just not the same.

Peter understood this. The empty chair belonged to Judas. Not only had Jesus left them, but their trusted brother, who had been with them through this life-changing experience, had betrayed them in a way that would be hard for us to fathom. The scripture passage says they numbered around 120. Could we possibly imagine the sense of grief and betrayal they felt every time they sat at the table with the empty seat? Talk about a church scandal!

Peter understands that he needs to fill the place at the table or the group will not be able to continue. In Acts, Luke has Peter quote two passages in Psalms, the first describes that scripture had to be fulfilled and justice was done. Judas made a choice to “go to his own way,” and suffered the consequences of his actions. the Greek word is *to,pon*. According to scholar James Dunn, “A human being, though chosen by the Lord for a dedicated ministry, can desert it ‘to go to his own place.’”

The group needed to know that Judas got what he deserved. It was time for the community to let their anger go and move forward. The second passage in Psalms addresses the need for replacing him. It was time to let go of what was.

Now the soil had to be prepared for the coming of the Holy Spirit. And that meant taking the next indicated step. They needed to take an inventory of what was most important. And for the author of Acts, Luke, it was the reconstitution of the twelve. It is necessary to replace Judas before the gift of the Spirit is given, Why? Because the Twelve, as mentioned in Luke 22:30, are to rule over Israel, and themselves symbolize the Twelve tribes of the restored Israel.

So now that it has been determined that Judas must be replaced. A selection criterion must be developed in the choosing of that replacement. According to Luke, there were three: 1) An apostle must have been one of those who followed Jesus continually. 2) This apostle must have followed Jesus from his baptism by John until the ascension, and thus (3) he must also have witnessed the resurrection of Jesus. This narrowed the choices down to Barsabbas and Matthias so they cast lots to determine who it should be.

At this point questions may be arising for you regarding the prayerfulness of casting lots, or why they had made such an important decision before the coming of the Holy Spirit, but there is a significance here to the casting of lots. Although they created a short list for God to choose from based upon their prayerful understanding of the necessity of filling Judas' ministry, they actually wanted to leave the final decision up to God. In Israel, superstition and magic were forbidden, only the priestly *Urim* and *Thummin* could be used, the Old Testament practice where stones with names on them were put in a vessel which was shaken until one fell out . So in this way, they were again following Israelite custom. But we never again hear of casting lots in the Bible.

Matthias was selected, and he is never mentioned again. But in the next chapter, we learn of the miracle of Pentecost and the birth of the church. For the disciples, there is a restoration of their confidence from the support of the Holy Spirit. There is no stopping them now!

So was replacing Judas the right thing to do? It seems so. Even if Matthias never was significant as an apostle, his addition had an effect on the followers of Jesus. They were whole again. They were the reconstituted Israel. They had become ready to receive the Holy Spirit as they had moved through their fear and grief and were able to act.

They had come through their desert testing, this in-between time, and realized that the Way of Life they experienced following Jesus was too precious to give up. And they became willing, like Peter, to stand up for their faith. And as a result of this Jesus becomes more powerfully present among them as Holy Spirit than he was during his earthly ministry!

But perhaps the most important point that can be learned from this passage is that our constructs cannot possibly contain God's. We must guard against giving God only two choices. Chances are that God has much better choices than those we could ever conceive.

Who could have dreamed up the conversion of Saul? How many times has the worst enemy become the strongest ally? And although it was important in Acts for the twelve to be reconstituted according the parameters necessary to serve as a witness, James Dunn reflects that "Of the three most prominent and influential people in the subsequent narrative (Peter, James brother of Jesus, and Paul), only one met the qualifications to become one of 'the apostles'! What we believe to be so important and necessary, is often insignificant to God.

We may feel anxious, and uncomfortable waiting for the Holy Spirit, but the worst thing we can do is allow fear to prevent God from doing amazing things in our lives and in our churches.

So is there a pattern here that can be useful in addressing the challenges we face in today's world, in our church, in our own lives? Here's what we can learn from Acts:

1. When we find ourselves in the In-Between Time we must first we ask ourselves if we're suffering from a loss of confidence and track its root cause.
2. We need to bring the community together to marshal its resources and focus on our strengths, not our weaknesses.
3. Then we pray until a leader or an idea emerges, and keep on praying.
4. We need to examine honestly what might be holding us back from stepping out in faith. We become willing to let go of what was to become what God wants.
5. We remind ourselves that God is in control and can do what we cannot.
6. We indicate our willingness to move forward by taking the next indicated step.
7. We take an inventory of what is most important.
8. Develop a selection criteria and narrow our choices through prayer always being open to the extraordinary options that God might bring into our consciousness.
9. And at this point we let God make the decision, Even if it's not one we've put forth!
10. And then we get ready to receive support of the Holy Spirit! Let us Pray...

## **CLOSING PRAYER**

Dear heavenly father, well you've placed us right in the middle of one of those hinge-times, a time of upheaval and uncertainty, but you've given us not only the history of our faith to remind us of your steadfast love and power, but you've given us the gifts of your Son and the Holy Spirit to guide us, and a community to love us. Help us Lord, to be strong and creative in the face of adversity, being willing to take risks, and stand up when we are called to do so. May we see the opportunity for our world and our church as one filled with new possibilities that only you can imagine. We pray now as your Son taught us. OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN.....

\*One of my favorite lines from *Bible Babel*, by Kristin Swenson.

\*\*This metaphor germinated from a description in Frederick Buechner's *Listening To Your Life*.