

God Didn't Bring Us This Far to Leave

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And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised, so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Last month, we discussed the chaotic ride that it was to be a disciple during Eastertide, and the time leading up to it. Witnessing miracles, watching the seas calm, entering Jerusalem with righteousness and humility wrapped into one, celebrating life, death and resurrection within a few days of each other. Pretty much living the adventure of a lifetime, with a clear end in sight that they hoped would never arrive, but arrive, it finally did. You know the feeling. I'd imagine most of us have had that one amazing teacher...the one who sees us for who we are, loves us and enriches us, and builds us up. We know the next grade's teacher is very, very different...we never want to leave that class, but summer comes and we say our goodbyes. Or it might a life-changing trip where we push every boundary, experience enrichment through new cultures, experiences and friendships, live as we've never lived before, and eventually...despite dreams of never leaving, despite complex plans to extend that feeling forever, we always end up in the customs line at a busy American airport. Or a bus station.

Maybe it's the concert of our dreams, the first time with the artist we've been waiting our whole lives to see. We bask in their glory, sing every song at the top of our lungs, and the encore provides a faint tease that maybe, just maybe this joy will never end, but the lights come up, the crowd disperses, and we walk into the night with a ringing in our ears...a somewhat painful monotone reminder of what has been, and will never quite be again.

The adventure has to end, and in the case of Easter, it might seem a little anticlimactic, a little bit of a letdown that Jesus ascends into heaven, reaching out his hands, and telling

them simply, “wait around here, in the city that kills the prophets and stones God’s messengers...wait in this city of tyranny and uncertainty, occupied by an empire built upon human greed, and see what’s next”. Dejected as they might have been, Luke tells us they did just that...wait faithfully, praising God.

Friday night, the Reverend Verdis Levar Robinson and the Montpelier Gospel Choir filled this space with music carrying a history of holding up the light in the darkest of times. Music of praising God in times of oppression, over and over again.

I've come too far from where I started from,
they reminded us.
Nobody told me that the road would be easy,
I don't believe God brought me this far to leave me.

The disciples might have been finding their way through the dark, but their faith held strong. God didn’t bring them that far to abandon them. In my minister preparation class yesterday, someone made the statement that a good leader knows how to read the room. The comment was originally misunderstood as “a good leader knows when to *leave* the room”, and while everyone laughed, Jesus did exactly that. He had to go, so that what he left within all the disciples, what he left within all of us would have the room to rise up, in stark contrast to the authoritarian rule of Jerusalem. Authoritarian leaders do one thing really well...they are excellent authors. They are the very best storytellers of the most awful stories imaginable, and those stories have one objective: take away the power of the people. Jesus, in comparison, is the modest author of the greatest story that is, and he gains his power by giving that story back to us, helping us to see our own power. He brought us this far to empower us to rise up.

The disciples had no road map. No precisely spelled out liturgical calendar, no predictive strategies. They didn’t see Pentecost just around the door, but they were promised it. “I am sending upon you what my father promised...but stay here until you have been

clothed with power from on high”. Just like the Tenebrae chant we use to commemorate Maundy Thursday, the message remains consistent. Stay with me, remain here with me. Watch and pray, watch and pray. The disciples remained close to God in the temple, praising God, until it was time to go out and spread the good news. Despite being trapped in bad times, they needed time to pause, pray and praise. God didn’t bring them that far to leave them.

A couple thousand years later, it might feel eerily similar... finding ourselves in a land that feels occupied by a rapidly emerging empire, built on human greed. Finding ourselves in a situation where it might feel dangerous to speak the truth, that we must love our neighbors as ourselves, that we must stand up for and elevate those on society’s margins, that love is more important than status, doing the right thing is more important than placing a golden eagle on the gate of the temple at Jerusalem, or on the ceiling of the oval office. The landscape has changed, but the mission is the same. Wait and pray, until spirit calls us to rise up, and we will be called. Pentecost is coming, whether we realize it or not.

I don’t believe God brought us this far to leave us.

In that same class yesterday (and I apologize if things feel a little off today, a 7 hour class with a four hour round trip drive will do that), a room full of aspiring and practicing ministers was asked where we found holy ground. Answers included in the outdoors, with family, sunshine, water, in unanswered questions and unbridled possibility, on tops of mountains, deep in green valleys. Interestingly, nobody’s answer was “in church”. God calls us close in many different ways, the physical building just being one of many. God calls us to embrace the beauty that surrounds us, in community with each other, and in community with our planet. We are waiting in the city, but the instructions are clear. Don’t doom scroll, don’t feel stuck, watch, wait and above all, praise. As summer approaches, (maybe...any day now...) get out there and love it. Stay close to God in

whatever way feeds our soul and spirit, because in waiting, we are really just building the energy we need to go forth and speak truth to power once again in turbulent and hostile times. This story has played out again and again, and the biggest mistake we can make is missing all the beauty that has surrounded humanity, and brought us up out of the darkest times. The green blade always rises. Let's return to our first reading today, and what it implores us to do:

Stand like a tree, tall and strong. Lie down like a lake, reflecting all, resist like the sea relentlessly, speak like the wind, loud and free.

Take this time to find your own holy ground and embrace it exhaustively. Don't feel guilty about finding passion and loving life amidst darkness, and stay close to God, because God knows we'll need all the energy we have to spread the good news to all nations once again. Pentecost is just around the corner, after all, and arrives quite suddenly.

The road right now is not easy, but we've come way too far.

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