

Waiting for the Show to Begin
Acts Sermon Series – Chapter 1
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Waiting is not one of our strong suits as Americans. A woman's car stalls in traffic. She gets out and looks under the hood, but she's clueless as to what's wrong. Before long the driver behind her starts to lean on his horn. Finally the woman has had enough. She walks back to his car, smiles as sweetly as possible, and says, "I don't know what's the matter with my car, but if you want to go look under the hood, I'll be happy to stay here and honk for you."

We are not a patient people. We tend to be in a horn-honking, microwaving, FedEx mailing, fast-food eating, express-lane shopping hurry.

So how well do you wait? If your answer is, "not very well," then you can probably understand the mindset of the disciples in Act 1. In verse 6 they ask Jesus: "Lord, is this the time—is this *finally* the time—when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" You can't really blame them for asking. The disciples have given this rabbi over three years of their lives. They've tramped up and down the hills of Galilee. Against their better judgment, they even followed Jesus into the hornet's nest in Jerusalem. Sure enough, their hearts got broken on a very sad Friday when their rabbi was nailed to a tree. Then, three days later, their hearts were miraculously put back together again.

Well, that was 40 days ago. Now the disciples are growing restless. They've been waiting for something to happen. If you read between the lines, what they're suggesting to Jesus is this: "If you really are the Messiah, Lord, could you make all of our nation's dreams come true! And could you do it now?"

Waiting may be the single hardest thing we are called to do. That's goes for everything from the college graduate looking for a decent-paying job, to the childless couple waiting to start a family, to the person of color longing for the day when everyone's children will be judged "not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." Waiting is hard work.

Yet spend any amount of time reading the Bible and you quickly see that "wait" is one of God's favorite words. God came to Abraham and Sarah when they were in their

70's and shared the unimaginable promise that they would be the parents of a great nation. How long did they have to wait? Another 24 years. God told the Israelites they would be rescued from slavery in Egypt. How long did they have to wait? Over 400 years. God told Moses they were going to the Promised Land. How long did it take to get there? 40 years. And now, the answer to the disciples' question of when the kingdom is coming is much the same. "Wait," he tells them, "It's not for you to know the time. Just wait!"

Today we are starting a nine-week sermon series on the book of Acts. **Why are we doing this?** 1) Because, quite frankly, we want to get you reading your Bibles and going deeper into them. 2) Because the stories of Acts are inspiring as they show us all the possibilities of being the church in this, and any, age. 3) And maybe most important of all, because—like those early disciples—we are living in challenging times and we're not always sure how to respond. For instance, some Muslims want to build a mosque next to Ground Zero. Should we celebrate or shutter? Acts will give us some clues. Our church, the ELCA, has been badly strained by last year's sexuality votes. What are we supposed to do? Acts will give us some clues. University of Minnesota Rochester students are all around us and are increasing in numbers. Should we reach out to them? Acts will give us some clues.

Not only does Acts help us in dealing with challenging issues, it reminds us why we are here in the first place. In verse 8 Jesus gives the disciples their marching orders. Let's read it together: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." That's a tall order. Whatever else Acts does for us, this book is going to push us and prod us to look beyond ourselves and out into the world.

Why are we reading Acts now? Because in many ways Zumbro Lutheran Church is at a crossroads. You've called three new pastors in less than a year. Like you, we pastors are wondering: What sort of church will we be going forward? To help us explore this question, we've scheduled two important visioning events this fall. I hope you can attend. On Sunday evening, September 26, we're going to be *Celebrating Our Past*. Why? Because whatever Zumbro becomes in the future, it needs to be related to where we have come from. Then on Saturday, October 9, we have our second visioning

event: *Exploring Our Future*. We'll look at what it means to be a downtown church and to live with an Acts 1:8 mentality. Specifically, what is our Jerusalem, and Judea, and Samaria? What new thing is God calling us to do?

So what are we reading in the book of Acts? Verses 1-2 give us some hints: “In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up into heaven....” What’s the “first book” being talked about? The gospel of Luke. Both Luke and Acts were written by the same author. Luke tells the story of Jesus. Acts tells the story of the early church. And who is *Theophilus*? Maybe a wealthy patron whose financial support made it possible to write this book. But I think the name *Theophilus* hints that something else is going on too. The name literally means, “Lover of God.” This book is intended for all who love God. It’s about forming us as disciples of Jesus. Acts may read like a history book, but it’s more than that. It’s a book crammed full of sacred stories. And at the heart of it, it’s the story of what happens when God gets hold of a people—when God gets hold of a church—and uses them to change the world.

So, back to the theme of waiting: if the disciples already have their marching orders, **why does Jesus tell them to wait?** The main reason is that they’re not going to be able to get much done without the help of the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit won’t be poured out for another ten days. “Wait,” they are told, “wait for power from on high.” A second reason is this: what God does in God’s people while they wait is often just as important as what they are waiting for. In other words, God regularly uses times of waiting to shape us and mold us into the people God wants us to be.

Think about it. **Waiting involves trust.** The disciples return from the Mount of Olives and devote themselves to prayer. They could have forged ahead, but to do what? Waiting is the continual, daily decision to say, “I will trust you, Lord. Even though the circumstances of my life aren’t always clear, and don’t always turn out the way I want them to, and may never turn out the way I would choose, I am betting everything on you. I have no Plan B.”

Waiting also involves hope. Verse 15 says that the earliest believers numbered about 120 people. Luke didn’t pick that number out of thin air. 120 was the number required to form a synagogue. This was Luke’s way of being hopeful. He was telling

them that God was at work behind the scenes. They already have enough disciples to form a legitimate community. And their community would be a fulfillment of God's promises to Israel.

Waiting also involves humility. Sometimes things can go terribly wrong with our plans: like Judas betraying his Lord. Waiting is an ongoing reminder that we are not in control. Still, even in the middle of a tragedy, God can work all things together for good. God guided them in the selection of Matthias who took take Judas' place. Waiting keeps us humble. It helps us to see that God is in charge, not us. God will come in God's own way and God's own time and makes things right again.

Shortly before he died, Henry Nowen painted an illustrative picture of waiting. Nowen was describing the work of some trapeze artists who had become his friends. He explained that there is a very special relationship between the flyer and the catcher. As the flyer is swinging high above the crowd, the moment comes when he lets go of the trapeze, when he arcs out into the air. For that moment, which must feel like an eternity, the flyer is suspended in nothingness. It's too late to reach back for the trapeze. There's no going back now. However, it's too soon to be grasped by the one who will catch him. In that moment, his job is to be as still as he can be. Says Nowen, "The flyer must never try to catch the catcher. He must wait in absolute trust. The catcher *will* catch him. But he must wait."

We are called to be a waiting people. That doesn't mean we need to be passive, with nothing to do. It does mean that we don't want to get out in front of God, either as individuals or as a church. As Chapter 1 comes to a close, the disciples are still waiting. They are promised that something is going to happen, but they don't know what it is. And they don't know when it will be. Is that the way life goes? God uses times of waiting to develop in us things like trust and hope and humility. And why? So that when God gets hold of us, God can use us in places like Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. Indeed, God can use a church like us to change the world.

Lewis Smedes says it well: "Waiting is our destiny as creatures who cannot by ourselves bring about what we hope for. We wait in darkness for a flame we cannot light, we wait in fear for a happy ending we cannot write. We wait for a "not yet" that feels like a "not ever." Waiting is the hardest work of hope." Amen.