

“In-between Jesus and the Spirit”

Preached on June 1st, 2014, by Pastor Brahm Semmler Smith

Based on Acts 1:6-14 and John 17:1-11

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace and peace from our risen and ascended Lord be with you.

I want you to think of a time in your life that was an in-between time. In-between, when something had come to an end, but what was to come next had not yet arrived yet. Those in-between, already but not quite yet experiences.

Some examples:

Ending one job, but only to have some time on your hands before the next one. Or losing your job, and having to wait for the next one to come along.

Maybe those months in between finding out you are pregnant and the day of the delivery of your new child. When moving from one community to another, and you are asked where are you from, and you don't know quite how to respond.

Or for today's crowd, Maybe the time between high school graduation and the beginning of college, when you aren't in high school any more, but you aren't quite yet in college. And you and your parents are trying to figure out what that means!

Sarah and I were just at our 10 year reunion at St. Olaf College this past week. While reconnecting with friends and classmates, we looked back 10 years and remembered what our lives were like, and the many in-betweens we were experiencing while we were leaving college. Many of my friends had plans, but still had to get to them. Many of them did not have plans, and were trying to figure out what was next. Find a job. Go to grad school. Join the peace corps or global missions. Move back home with mom or dad. We certainly were in an in-between time in our lives. And 10 years on, we can look back at this time with perspective and understanding. But in the moment, these times of being in-between can be uncomfortable. Anxiety can be high. Questions arise. Anticipation of “what's next” takes over our minds.

The disciples are in an in-between time today. It is the Sunday that happens to fall in-between Jesus' ascension and Pentecost. On Thursday this past week, we celebrated Jesus' ascension. And after he leaves, the church historical recognizes that there were 10 days between when Jesus leaves the disciples for the final time, and when the Holy Spirit comes on Pentecost. 10 days of waiting. 10 days of the disciples left with many questions about what is next while they carry on and worship and pray.

Are we left on our own? Does God abandon us? Why does Jesus leave us behind? Does this life or world even matter?

These are all questions that the first disciples and the early church had to grapple with. And they are questions we experience, too. The early church originally thought Jesus was going to be back really quick. In their own lifetimes. But when that didn't happen, the early Christians had to reevaluate what it was that Jesus had taught them and promised them.

Perhaps they were like the apostles in Acts today, with their eyes up towards the sky, needing to be reminded of what Jesus had taught and shown them while he was there with them. The angels ask the disciples: Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up at heaven? In other words, why are you standing around doing nothing staring at the clouds! Did you not hear what Jesus had said and taught? Did you not hear Jesus explain again and again of the importance of God's work and mission here in this place?

So often in our modern time, I hear faith described as it is all about getting to heaven. About following Jesus up into the sky. All we are in is an in-between time. The idea of the Rapture and all the Left Behind fictional dramas are big on this kind of thinking. This life, this place, this world, is a big in-between time. A better place

is waiting, and there's no mess there! We want to get up and follow Jesus today, up into the clouds and heaven. Heaven becomes the only focus, the only thing that faith is about. But is this what Jesus tells us in the Bible? Especially in the Gospel of John?

In a *Time* magazine interview back in 2008, and in many of his writings and interviews since, theologian N.T. Wright counters the line of thought that says it is all about heaven, saying, "Never at any point do the gospels or Paul say Jesus has been raised, therefore we are all going to heaven. They all say, Jesus is raised, therefore the new creation has begun, and we have a job to do."

Yes, we are in an in-between time. We are waiting for Christ to come again, as the angels say. But where is Christ coming? Back to us! Back to earth and God's new creation. Back the way he left. Back to God's kingdom here. And Jesus did not leave us unequipped or without instructions. We have a job to do. And what is this job?

It is to love this world that God so loves. It is to love the people that God so loves. God does not despise this world. God does not despise the people of this world. The Gospel of John repeatedly, again and again, professes how much God loves the world, and that is why Jesus came into the world in the first place. This is what we hear in Jesus' prayer for us today in John. Jesus goes through all of this – becomes born of the flesh, crucified on the cross, raised on the third day, and returns to the Father - so that we may know God and be one with God. Jesus came to embody, live out, and show God's love to the world.

And Jesus leaves after fulfilling this purpose. Jesus came into this world so that we might know God, and know of God's great love of us. And when he accomplishes this, he leaves. Jesus leaves, but we stay. As Jesus leaves, we are left here in this place, at this in-between time. But we are not left alone, and we are not left without a purpose. Jesus prays for us to be unified with God, and promises us the Holy Spirit. And in doing so, we receive an invitation and a command to participate God's work. The ELCA's slogan is God's work, Our Hands. In this phrase, we recognize that we take an active part in God's work in this world.

Eternal life, glory, and a relationship with God -- in John's Gospel these aren't things waiting out there somewhere but instead are all around us. Where? Jesus tells us today in verse 3: "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Most tangibly, we experience eternal life and bring glory to God through relationship. Relationship with God and Christ, and in living that out in doing what Jesus does: healing, feeding, caring, listening, sharing, and making known the grace and mercy of our God who so loves the world.

An East Indian Jesuit priest named Tony de Mello used to tell a story about disciples gathered around their master, asking him endless questions about God. And the master said that anything we say about God is just words, because God is unknowable. One disciple asked, "Then why do you speak of him at all?" and the master replied, "Why does the bird sing? She sings not because she has a statement but because she has a song."

We know God through Christ. We know God's love for us through Christ. What kind of song does this make us sing?

May our songs of praise involve a trust in God's active presence in our lives. May this faith and trust in God's presence strengthen and calm us in those times that are in-between. And may we be inspired by the Spirit to share in the work of salvation around us, in loving, serving, sharing, and caring for the world and the people that God so loves. Amen.