

## **No More Loitering**

Psalm 47; Acts 1:1-11

Ascension Sunday

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We once lived in a cul-de-sac. I arrived home one evening, and my engineer neighbor was standing in the cul-de-sac. I lowered my window and asked, “You waiting for Godot?”

He looked at me kind-of like you’re looking at me right now, as if he was thinking, “Oh, David has finally gone over the edge.” From his response, I knew that he apparently had not read Samuel Beckett’s play by that name, “Waiting for Godot.” It was voted “most significant English language play of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” and has been revived on Broadway this year. Nathan Lane and Bill Irwin play two tramps who are waiting for a visit from a person named Godot. The two tramps, Estragon and Vladimir, wait beside a country road. A lone tree is nearby. Over a period of two days they argue with each other, clown around, get bored, repeat themselves, contemplate suicide, and just wait. They wait for Godot, whom they feel certain will arrive at any moment. Other characters arrive, one of whom is played by John Goodman, and they are as helpless and hopeless as Estragon and Vladimir. Everyone in the play is waiting, but the mythical Godot never arrives. The play belongs in the theater of the absurd, and there are about as many interpretations of its meaning as there are people who see it.

Do you know what it means to loiter? Loiter: to stand or wait around idly or without apparent purpose. That’s what Estragon and Vladimir were doing, loitering, standing around without any apparent purpose. At the end of the play a little boy arrives with a note supposedly from Godot. The boy tells the two men that he has seen Godot and that he will come tomorrow. The two tramps are torn. They want to leave but cannot. Their indecision is haunting. If any of you see it this summer, let me know.

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” we read in our text for today. Were the disciples of Jesus loitering in Acts 1, standing around without any apparent purpose? It was forty days after the resurrection, Luke tells us, forty days that the disciples were able to be in the

presence of the risen Lord. In Acts 1, Jesus and the disciples were in Jerusalem. Jesus told them to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the “promise of the Father.” We will talk about that promise next week on the day of Pentecost. The disciples used this occasion to ask their last questions of Jesus. His answers were vague, but he gave them this promise, which certainly is not vague:

*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.*

And here’s what happened next. Luke says that as they were watching, Jesus was “lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” In other words, they were eyewitnesses to the ascension. They were not eyewitnesses to the resurrection. They saw the empty tomb, and they saw the risen Lord. But according to the gospels, no one witnessed the resurrection itself. So while they were not witnesses to the resurrection, Luke is making it perfectly clear here that they were witnesses to the ascension of Jesus, lending credibility to their message that he was alive.

Do you remember in the Old Testament when God led the people of Israel through the wilderness? God’s presence was known to them as fire by night and what by day? A cloud. A cloud by day and a fire by night. God’s presence, God’s activity among the people, often was presented as a cloud. Let me read this from the book of Exodus. Moses has just received the Ten Commandments. In chapter twenty-four, he goes back up Mt. Sinai, a trip I was privileged to make a couple of years ago. Listen to the text:

*Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud.... Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.*

For forty days Moses was able to be in the presence of the Almighty One, who was present in a cloud.

For forty days, Luke says, the disciples of Jesus were in the presence of the resurrected one. Luke then says that “a cloud took him out of their

sight.” For the disciples, it was as if the Almighty One came from the heavenly abode and took Jesus away. They were amazed. No, that’s too soft a word. They were astonished, left open-mouthed, absolutely flabbergasted.

They were standing in their amazement watching this event when suddenly two men wearing white robes appeared. Two men wearing white. Do you remember Luke’s account of the resurrection? The women went to the tomb. The stone guarding the entrance to the tomb was already rolled away. They went into the tomb, and the body of Jesus was gone. Then Luke says this, “While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.” The two men met the Old Testament’s requirement that two witnesses confirm the truth of an alleged event. They were present at the empty tomb, and now they are present at the “other” resurrection, what we call the ascension, to which the disciples were eyewitnesses.

If this wasn’t such an amazing text, I might think that what the two men say is intended as humor. It’s a question, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

In other words, why are you standing around idly, with no apparent purpose? The two men in white robes were saying, no more loitering. The show’s over. Remember what he just told you. You will receive *dunamis*, “power,” from which we get the English word dynamite. You will receive explosive power that will enable you to be *marturia*, “witnesses,” from which we get the English word martyr. That power from God would enable them to be witnesses right there in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

No more loitering because there’s work to be done. No more standing around idly with no apparent purpose because a movement was being birthed that would change the course of human history. That is the message of the two men in white robes.

You know, we still live with that expectation. The church is not a memorial society to a dead founder. No, his life and message are alive in us. We don’t have time to be standing around looking into the heavens. There is a sense of urgency in the work Christ has called us to do—in Huntsville, in

Madison County, in Kentucky, and to the ends of the earth. No more loitering, our Lord still says. We are given power to be witnesses to his life and message.

Kelly and I were in San Francisco a few years back. When we travel to other places, we enjoy simply walking the streets and getting a feel for the city. As we walked I noticed that many of the downtown churches had signs posted at the front that said, “No loitering.” I thought that was a little odd. Why wouldn’t the churches want people gathering around their front door?

We continued to walk, and I saw a church with a sign that read this way, “Homeless Welcome to Loiter Here.” Then I realized what was happening. San Francisco, like most large cities, has a homelessness problem. Homeless men and women tend to seek aid at churches. Some of the churches apparently became so frustrated that they didn’t want to deal with the homeless people any more. They made their position perfectly clear at the front door: No loitering. One church, however, saw the homeless men and women and children as an opportunity to be witnesses to the life and message of our Lord.

That is the measure of a church’s effectiveness. It’s not about how many people we can gather to gaze into the heavens. It is about our witness to the life and message of our Lord.

Dr. Findley Edge, God rest his soul, was a prophet who taught at Southern Seminary back in a better time. He used to say that the churches have it all wrong. The churches continually say “come.” Come to this event. Come to this meeting. Come to this class. The church, he said, is built around a “come structure.”

If he were with us today, Dr. Edge would call that loitering. He said that the churches should be built around a “go structure.” Go to homeless men, women, and children. Go to this place of need. Go to another place of pain. Go to where people need the witness of our Lord (*The Greening of the Church*, p. 163).

Our effectiveness is not measured by coming. It is measured by going. Remember what he told us. You will receive *dunamis*, “power.” You will receive explosive power that will enable you to be *marturia*,

“witnesses.” Let us use the power God gives us to be good witnesses to his life and message.

### Closing Prayer

Lord, help us to be good stewards of the power of your Holy Spirit. Help us to be effective witnesses to your life and message. Amen.