

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Spirit Space**

Acts 1:1-14

In today's text, the apostles go from staring at the sky to staring at the ceiling. After Jesus' ascension, they stood there, gazing into outer space. Now they occupy interior space. It feels like their square footage has diminished. But they're simply doing what Jesus told them to do. He didn't tell them to rush out and save the world. He told them to sit tight in Jerusalem, and wait for the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

It's tempting to want to think ahead to the next chapter of Acts, when the Holy Spirit comes in power and with dramatic effect. The sights and sounds of Pentecost make for exciting worship. Preacher Thomas Long tells about an occasion when he was teaching some children in a confirmation class. According to Long,

It was a very small group. In fact, there were only three young girls in the class. In one session, I was instructing them about the festivals and seasons of the Christian year, and when we came to the discussion of Pentecost, I asked them if they knew what Pentecost was. Since none of the three knew, I proceeded to inform them that Pentecost was "when the church was sitting in a group and the Holy Spirit landed on them like tongues of fire on their heads. Then they spoke the gospel in all the languages of the world." Two of the girls took this information in stride, but the third looked astonished, her eyes wide. I looked back at her, and finally she said, "Gosh, Reverend Long, we must have been absent that Sunday."<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes our worship gatherings can seem less like Pentecost and more like the scene at the end of today's text, a more serene gathering of believers who are waiting for the Spirit promised by the Father. In this case, their sanctuary is a spacious upstairs room in someone's house. It's no cathedral, but it serves the purpose. After all, prayer is their main reason for coming together. Jesus expects these apostles and disciples to do more than just hang out with each other. He doesn't tell them to shelter in place and binge watch their favorite shows on Netflix, simply passing the time until the Holy Spirit shows up. No, these followers of Jesus do what God's people regularly do. They gather for prayer to wait upon God to act.

That's the way things work in Acts. God is the primary one who's on the move, redeeming and restoring. The gospel spreads, and God's purpose unfolds, at his initiative and according to his time. But that doesn't mean his people are completely passive and uninvolved in the progress of the Word. Individual disciples, and the church as a whole, have significant parts to play in God's mission. But from beginning to end, it remains God's mission, God's kingdom.

Before God launches his kingdom mission in Jerusalem, he assigns the apostles a major project called waiting. This waiting is to be done in solidarity with one another, through prayer and the study of the Scriptures. Before they start taking their message to the local streets and neighborhoods, the apostles and other disciples will occupy shared indoor space.

That sounds familiar, doesn't it. Most of us have spent the past two and a half months learning more about how to share space with others. I know that different folks have responded in different ways. I spoke to one person who said the stay-at-home policies

didn't bother him too much because he was more of a homebody to begin with. Some people, because of their temperament, their stage in life, their health, or work flexibility, were already accustomed to being at home a lot.

But for many people, this situation has been a major adjustment. Overnight, their house or apartment became part family space, part office, part school, part gym, part whatever else needed to be done within the four walls called home. Under those kinds of circumstances, one of the main challenges has been how to be together yet also allow for one another's personal space. Family cohesion is one thing, but there are times when each person needs some time alone as well.

That's the situation at home. Add to that the situation when you venture out in public. Just when we've gotten used to staying six feet from one another, some experts began suggesting that may not be enough, especially when we're indoors. Before the coronavirus pandemic, social distancing wasn't a regular part of our vocabulary. Now it has become a way of life. No matter where you are, who you're with, or what you're doing, you have to pay attention to matters of space. The same will hold true for churches as many congregations begin to reopen their doors.

What a contrast to that upstairs prayer chapel that the apostles and other believers occupied. Imagine them gathering for worship under current protocols. Imagine Peter getting his temperature checked at the door. Imagine John catching himself just before he started to shake Andrew's hand. Imagine James making sure the chairs are appropriately spaced. Imagine Philip and Thomas dispensing hand sanitizer to every worshiper. Imagine all the disciples singing hymns while wearing their masks. And remember that these are observant Jews, so they gather for multiple prayer services every day.

Thankfully, that core group that comprised the early church didn't have to plan their daily and weekly worship around the realities of a pandemic. But they did have to navigate all sorts of other challenges. Their own impatience may have been one of them. We get a sense of this earlier in our text when the disciples ask the risen Jesus for specifics about when he's going to revitalize Israel and bring in God's perfect reign. They want Jesus to give them a specific date. Instead Jesus gives them a mild rebuke. God alone is qualified to know such things. As Eugene Peterson renders it, Jesus says to them, "You don't get to know the time. Timing is the Father's business. What you'll get is the Holy Spirit" (vv. 7-8). And even for that they'll have to wait.

This instruction to wait prayerfully runs against our inclination and desire to get things done for Jesus. After all, isn't that what committed Christians do? They get to work for the kingdom. They pour themselves into the ministry of the church. They put their faith into practice through words of witness, acts of love, and deeds of mercy. Discipleship calls for activism not idleness. And yet, after being told that they'll be participants in a mission that reaches "to the ends of the earth" (v. 8), the first thing the disciples do is start praying. Not necessarily what we would think of as the most productive, results-driven activity.

There's a story about a pastor who was praying in his church office one morning and a prominent member of the congregation called. The secretary told the gentleman that the pastor was busy praying right now. "Praying!" said the church member. "Shouldn't he be working?"

In an upstairs room in a house in Jerusalem, the first followers of Jesus went to work praying. Within those four walls, there was worship. There was prayerfulness. And that prayerfulness was essential to creating space for the Spirit. We speak of these folks, and ourselves, as disciples. The word *discipleship* is tied to the word *discipline*. And as Henri

Nouwen once put it, "In the spiritual life, the word *discipline* means 'the effort to create some space in which God can act.'"<sup>2</sup>

As I've noted, space has been a major issue during COVID-19. Confining ourselves to a particular space. Closing the doors on spaces where we're accustomed to gathering. Maintaining appropriate space between ourselves and others. Protecting our personal space. We've never lived with such steady attention to where we're located. So maybe this is a good time for us to be reminded that location matters a lot to God as well. The Spirit's arrival at Pentecost shows us that God's relationship with us isn't a matter of social distancing. Rather than confine himself to his personal space, God comes to us in Jesus Christ, who is now with us by means of the Holy Spirit. God doesn't remain remote and aloof from us. On the contrary, through the Spirit, God enters our space and resides with us. As believers, we become a dwelling place for God.

This is true for us as individuals and as a community. Just as those first followers of Jesus gathered one by one, by name, in the upstairs room, to seek the Lord, we've each been praying our way through this challenging time. In one respect, this has called for solitude. From a Christian perspective, solitude is about being with God and God alone. There's no doubt that for many people, this pandemic has deepened their sense of loneliness and isolation. They've felt even more cut off from relationships, especially face-to-face ones, that make life meaningful and satisfying. But at the same time, maybe this experience has also given you opportunities to slow down, sit down, and pay more attention to your inner life, your heart space that the Spirit wants to occupy more fully. One of the benefits of solitude is that it requires you to stop and be with yourself, in God's presence, to examine yourself more deeply, and to listen to God more attentively. As time passes, and we come further out of this situation, may you be able to look back and say that during this time when you couldn't see many of the faces you're used to seeing, you used this period in your life to seek God's face, and to make more room in yourself for the power of the Holy Spirit.

One way to tell how you've been doing at practicing solitude is to reflect on how you've been doing at practicing community. I know that has been harder to do during a pandemic, since we haven't been able to gather in person. But there have been plenty of other ways to stay connected and live in community with one another, and we've utilized many of them. Our building may have been closed, but our church has still been open the whole time, sharing together in the mission of Christ.

Remember that those who came together in the upstairs room to wait prayerfully for the Holy Spirit had been with Jesus during his earthly ministry. They had witnessed our Lord's own disciplines of solitude and community, through which the Spirit empowered him. In fact, when Luke tells us about Jesus' baptism, he says that as Jesus was praying, the Holy Spirit descended on him (3:21-22). And now, his gathered followers prayerfully anticipate the coming of the Spirit upon them, so that they can continue the mission of our Lord.

Fellow disciples, until we're able to assemble again in familiar surroundings, be constant in prayer and worship. Maintain a faithful rhythm of solitude and community. Create space for the Spirit to move and work in your life and in our church. Stay open to ways that the Spirit may come to you and get you involved in the mission of Christ, close to home and far from home.

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<sup>1</sup> *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (April-June 1996) 34.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Nouwen, "From Solitude to Community to Ministry." Christianity Today website. Accessed May 28, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/1995/spring/51280.html>>.