



Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter
John Meacham
May 24, 2020

Note: The sermon for All Saints Franklin on the Seventh Sunday of Easter was a video posted by the National Cathedral of historian John Meacham. This is the transcript of that sermon and you can watch the video at this link: <https://cathedral.org/sermons/sermon-jon-meacham-2/>

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

It was the most reasonable of questions. After the cataclysm of the Passion, the horrors of Golgotha, and then the wonder of the Resurrection, the disciples were understandably seeking answers. Who wouldn't? In our own time, you and I are impatient about the reopening of barbershops and baseball—imagine how hungry we'd be for clarity on the meaning of a murdered Master. “Lord,” the disciples ask in our first lesson, “is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” But Jesus, as, alas, was his wont, is maddeningly elusive. “It is not for you to know,” He says in reply, “the times or the periods that the Father has set by his own authority.”

And then He is gone—again. He ascends out of time and history. He leaves his followers in confusion. So what do they do? They pray, they wait, and they wonder.

Which is what you and I are doing now: praying, waiting, and wondering. If you are anything like me—and I suspect you are—the praying is fine. We're used to that. It's the waiting and the wondering that give us pause. The Christian story is at once reassuring and confounding. In the gospel, Jesus tells the Father, “All mine are yours, and yours are mine.... Holy Father, protect them ... so that they may be one, as we are one.” And yet, and yet—so much of our faith is captured in that phrase: And yet. We're assured that the world has been put to rights, that Jesus's death and resurrection have restored the order that was shattered in Genesis, that salvation and renewal are ours for the asking.

And yet: Where's the Lord when we need Him? We're as enveloped in mystery as human beings have been since the first fist was raised toward the sky, asking Why? Why do the innocent suffer, and the innocent

die? Why are some rich, others poor? Why do some find love while others search fruitlessly? Why are some hearts full, and others perpetually broken?

We do not know. The world is a tragic place. Religion offers one set of responses; philosophy still others. It is, however, religion that has most fundamentally shaped the world in which you and I live. “All men,” Homer wrote, “have need of the gods,” and the persistent role of faith across human experience is testament to its power. And so let us consider for a moment: Why does faith endure in the face of disease and death? Why, in other words, do we wait and wonder?

Here’s my answer: We wait and wonder not in spite of history but because of history. Had Jesus simply been a great moral teacher, the most charismatic of rabbis and messianic figures in the teeming world of the first century, you and I would most likely not be living our lives as we do. The great truth at the heart of this complex story is that those disciples who so rarely managed to elicit a straight answer from their Lord genuinely believed that reality had been upended by their lived experience of the ministry, Passion, and Resurrection of a single man.

Their faith was about making sense of a series of events so singular and so compelling that they were willing to die in defense of their vision of a new truth that come into the world and utterly transformed that world. The New Testament is very much a product of a particular time and place. It was written by authors who expected Jesus’s imminent return to inaugurate the Kingdom of God on earth, a new reality of a restored Israel.

They waited and wondered, sustained by counsel such as that offered in First Peter: “Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him.... And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace... will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.” So they were ready—ready for the Son of Man to return on clouds of glory; ready to fly to meet Him at the sound of a trumpet; ready for that elusive hour when every tear would be wiped away.

And yet—there it is again—the Lord did not return. It’s been more than a little while. We are left, then, with history and with hope. History in the sense that we seek act in love within time and space, and those acts of love sustain us—in the giving and in the receiving—as glimpses of reconciliation and restoration.

Love is difficult. We are commemorating Memorial Day, the annual occasion of honoring those who gave what President Lincoln called the last full measure of devotion. Today’s epistle is also part of the Lincoln canon. Though our current translation tells not to be surprised “at the fiery ordeal that is taking place” amongst us,

the King James Version, which Lincoln intimately knew, rendered the passage as “the fiery trial,” which Lincoln quoted in late 1861, writing: “Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history.... The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation.”

We face those trials which unfold within history with abiding sense of hope—hope that the promises of the Passion will come to pass at an hour and in a place veiled from our eyes and beyond our understanding. One can, of course, dismiss all of this as wishful thinking, or as nostalgia, or as foolishness. Yet our faith is rooted in reality—in the reality of the story of Israel, and in the reality of the experience of the disciples in the first century. The choice is ours: abandon all hope, or hold fast to it.

I choose to wait and wonder not in despair, for the evidence of the gospel is that in our barren times, in times of violence and of virus, of gloom and of fear, joy will come in the morning. That is our story. That is our faith. Let us wait and wonder in the conviction that death and darkness will give way to life and light. It happened before, long ago. And in that history lies our hope.