



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
16 May 2021
Sermon: Witnessing and Waiting
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Acts 1:1-11

Acts 1:1-11 (NRSV)

1 In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ² until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴ While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷ He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ 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.” ⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹ They said, “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.”

Some days, that’s all I can do, stare at the clouds, at the spot where Jesus disappeared. What else is there to do, anyway? He asked us to sit and wait here in Jerusalem after all. Waiting, actually, after all we’ve been through, is a blessing. Better than the days of terror following his arrest and execution. And if I’m being honest, as momentous as his resurrection was, it’s nice just to take a pause - these last forty days have been a whirlwind, walking around with the resurrected Christ, hearing of the kingdom of God. Now is the time to take a breath, and look toward the promise of the Spirit.

Alongside the comfort of these calm days, I’ll admit, there is also another feeling. How can I describe it? Exhaustion? Languishing even? I can feel the energy drain from my nervous system, after three years of high alert, after the trauma of Good Friday, the elation of Easter Sunday.

Now I find this strange mix of opposites in my system - excitement and decline, expectation and stasis. Some days, that's all I can do, stare at the clouds, at the spot where Jesus disappeared.

This past week, I've been trying to imagine how the disciples felt following Jesus's ascension. At the beginning of Acts, Jesus tells them to wait in Jerusalem for Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit. And then these curious verses follow: Jesus is lifted above the clouds, out of sight, and angels appear, asking the disciples, "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" It's like they are dumbstruck, shocked. Their savior is gone, and, after all they had been through, they are told to wait, wait for the Spirit.

Perhaps, it's not so grandiose today to say we can relate to the disciples of Acts' first chapter. Not that we live under the tyranny of Rome, or walk with the resurrected Jesus and see him lifted to the sky. But still, we can relate to that sitting and waiting, a pregnant pause, after living through a time of deep emotional upheaval. With the change of the seasons, sometimes, without warning, I am taken back to the anxiety of last spring. Do you remember how you felt when you read the first reports of thousands of deaths from COVID-19 and hundreds of thousands of daily infections? Can you remember how your nervous system reacted to the closing of schools, the end of in-person worship, the first hundred thousand dead?

What about the election of 2020 in the midst of the pandemic? Can you recall how you felt in November of 2020? How about in early January of 2021? Or just last month - do you remember the state of your nervous system in the moments before Derek Chauvin's judge read the jury's verdict?

We have been through a year of heightened anxiety. With our nervous systems set on high alert for fourteen months, it's no wonder that, at the slightest provocation, the people of our city ran out of their homes and drained every gas station in town this week, wondering if this will be the next crisis. Right now, like the disciples, we find ourselves in a liminal space, an ambiguous space. The strangeness of this year is not over, but it is becoming familiar, and its wearing on us.

"There's a Name for the Blah You're Feeling: It's Called Languishing" the title of a New York Times editorial by psychologist Adam Grant, published last month. Grant says,

At first, I didn't recognize the symptoms that we all had in common. Friends mentioned that they were having trouble concentrating. Colleagues reported that even with vaccines on the horizon, they weren't excited about 2021. A family member was staying up late to watch "National Treasure" again even though she knows the movie by heart. And instead of bouncing out of bed at 6 a.m., I was lying there until 7, playing Words with Friends.

It wasn't burnout — we still had energy. It wasn't depression — we didn't feel hopeless. We just felt somewhat joyless and aimless. It turns out there's a name for that: languishing.

*Languishing is a sense of stagnation and emptiness. It feels as if you're muddling through your days, looking at your life through a foggy windshield. And it might be the dominant emotion of 2021.*¹

Do these words sound familiar? I hear it sometimes in the groups and classes that I've facilitated over zoom these past few months. When we've started with a check-in, over and over I hear it: Congregants saying things like, "There's so much that I need to do, but I can't find the energy. I can't concentrate. The days blend into one another."

I feel it in myself. Just this week, even while writing this sermon, at times I caught myself starring at the screen, aimless. We hear a different type of fatigue from many of our Black and Brown siblings in faith, fighting every day in a culture, and a community, and a country that for hundreds of years has not recognized their full humanity; they say, "I'm tired. I'm fighting every day, and I'm tired."

Have you been languishing lately? Have you, like the disciples, been staring up at the heavens, at the spot where Jesus disappeared, wondering when he will come back, when joy and direction will come back, when you will feel the Spirit finally descend? The pastoral theologian Robert Dykstra says it well in a sermon on this passage: "We're still gazing there," he says, "still looking up as we're counting down to two thousand years later, straining in this life after God to see some face through the clouds, longing to feel some assurance that we're not alone, that things are at last are going to be all right. But those clouds take [Jesus] out of our sight."²

And yet,
And yet, languishing and formation are two sides of the same patient coin.
And yet, the Spirit is at work in and on us, even when we cannot feel it.

Malcom Gladwell's book *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* is about the lightning-fast processing of our unconscious mind, what we might call our intuition.³ Our mind works at two speeds. There is the slow, deliberative mind, the conscious that thinks through a problem, going step by step. This is the mind that writes papers and sermons. It rehashes arguments. It remembers the plot lines of your favorite show. But in front of all that conscious thought is something much faster and less noticeable. Your intuition is the unconscious part of your mind that saw my face come on the screen and recognized it was Richard. It's the part of your mind that takes a sip from your mug and recognizes coffee or tea. The only way we can navigate our world is through the automatic processing of the unconscious mind. If we had to think through every step we take, every face we encounter, every bite of lunch, we would be stuck always in deliberation.

Gladwell argues, however, that the processing of unconscious mind is not always reliable. It

¹ Adam Grant, "There's a Name for the Blah You're Feeling: It's Called Languishing," *The New York Times*, April 19, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/well/mind/covid-mental-health-languishing.html>

² Robert Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon: Personal Pastoral Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 31.

³ Malcom Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 2007).

must be trained - the way a musician learns to read music of the page without thinking, the way an art dealer learns to sense a forgery at first sight, the way a faithful congregant can recognize bad theology a few seconds into a sermon. The unconscious mind must be shaped; it must be formed.

Take, for example, the Harvard Implicit Association Test, the IAT.⁴ Don't go to it now; please wait until the end of the service. But you can see the website address here.

There's a number of tests you can take, but Gladwell writes about the Implicit Association Test on race. In that test, you are shown a number of white and Black faces, and you are asked to pair the faces with either a positive or negative description. You have to go as fast as you can, at the click of one button or another on your keyboard. First you pair white faces with positive descriptions and Black faces with negative descriptions. Then it's reversed, and you pair white faces with negative descriptions and Black faces with positive ones. And the test measures how long it takes you to do each task. It measures, for example, if you press the button to pair white faces and positive descriptions faster than when you are asked to pair Black faces and positive descriptions. Like any other psychological test, the IAT is not perfect or definitive, but it does give us a window into our unreliable intuition.

For example, I am a white man socialized in a systemically racist culture. My test results revealed this formation. Gladwell describes himself as biracial. His mother was white and his father was Black. His test also showed an implicit bias toward white people. To get an accurate picture, you need to take the test many times, but overall, compendium of results show what type of culture we live in. Over millions of tests, white and Black test-takers alike have shown an overwhelming bias toward white people. Think of what all that split second, unconscious bias means, the different experiences a white person or Black person navigating a police stop, or a job interview, or a doctor's visit.

But again, our intuition is not fixed. It can be changed. In the book, Gladwell writes about a student who has taken the IAT every day for hundreds of days. Every time, the test showed varying levels of implicit bias toward white people. All but one time. That one time, the student happened to have just watched a Black athlete win an Olympic medal. The test result changed when the student was exposed to a message that ran just slightly counter to our white dominant culture.⁵

Of course, that is oversimplifying things. The change was a temporary and ultimately superficial. But it should give us pause. Think for a second about your formation, over time. What messages about creation and God's people do you expose yourself to day after day, week after week? Ask yourself, how are you reorienting your vision away from the consumer-driven, the historically and systemically racist, sexist, and homophobic, the competitive and the hierarchal frames that we have been given? How do you expose your soul to the lens of grace, given to us by our creator?

⁴ See Harvard Implicit Association Test, <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

⁵ See Gladwell, *Blink*, 97.

There's a certain restlessness to progressive Christianity, I'm finding, as I journey through this life of faith with you, Grace Covenant. Rightfully, there's a focus on doing, on making a difference. At times that can slide into white saviorism in communities like GCPC, but not necessarily. There are responsible ways to serve and partner in community, and we continue to learn how to do that. Sometimes, I hear frustration with the slower, less tangible work of formation, another book study, another Sunday school class, another Bible study. I empathize with that frustration, especially in the midst of a pandemic when some of the tangible service and partnership opportunities of our community have necessarily taken a pause.

But do not mistake formation for languishing. Do not mistake waiting on the Spirit for procrastination. Because God takes the time to shape a community, and an individual. The resurrected Christ walked with the disciples for forty days and then asked them to wait even longer before the day of Pentecost, longer still before the days when the church "had all things in common [and] would sell their positions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all" (Acts 2:44-45), longer still before Peter's leadership and before Paul's journeys. The disciples first had to stare up at the clouds, and wait on the Spirit.

Grace Covenant, the Spirit is playing a long game, a marathon rather than a sprint. It calls you inward to the soul work of formation just as it calls you outward to the work of service and partnership. Formation and service go hand in hand; you cannot do one responsibly without the other.

Perhaps you feel you are languishing these days. If so, you are not alone. These are hard days. And yet, and yet, the Spirit calls; the Spirit calls to us; the Spirit is present with us in hard times.

As you are able, as it is life-giving, remember to reach out to your community; join a PW Circle, or a study group, read *Caste* with the Racial Justice Book Series, keep coming to worship. It makes a difference, inside and out. As much as these days drag us down, and pull on our hearts in lonely and languishing days, the Spirit nonetheless is at work in this moment. The Spirit is calling you and forming you. It is remaking us so that we can see ourselves and our community, and our neighbor through the eyes of love and grace. Thanks be to God.