

I

A few years ago, when our youngest son was just an infant, our family planned a road trip from our home in Texas to the Gulf Coast of Alabama, a drive that would carry us through parts of four states and cover nearly 700 miles.

We had planned to leave at first light, but the baby woke up for a feeding at about 4 a.m., and since we were already up, we decided to get an early start. We gingerly carried the twins from their beds and strapped them into their car seats while they were still in their pajamas, thinking that they would sleep for another few hours.

The streets were empty and the sky was still dark as we pulled out of our neighborhood, and all was quiet in the van as I sipped on my coffee. I was certain that all three boys had fallen back asleep and that we were about to cover some ground.

But you know what happened next. We had covered precisely one mile of the trip when a small voice called from the darkness behind me. And if you've ever taken a long road trip with small kids, you know the question that small voice asked.

“Are we there yet?”

II

There. Yet. Those two simple words convey something about arriving at a particular place, at a particular time. And it strikes me that as we continue to navigate our way through this global pandemic, one of the ways in which it has affected all of us is that it has caused

us a sense of temporal and spatial dislocation. How many times did we find ourselves uncertain which day of the week it was? How many times did we wonder about what it might feel like when we were able to safely return to even the most ordinary places like grocery stores or parks, to say nothing of sacred places like houses of worship?

And although the pandemic is by no means over, at least here in the United States, we're beginning to see some legitimate light on the horizon. And so I think all of us, whether we're aware of it or not, find ourselves asking questions that come when we've experienced such a long season of temporal dislocation. “Are we there yet?”

And in our story for today, we find the disciples asking those same kinds of questions of Jesus.

III

Last week, our high school seniors did an outstanding job of wrapping up our walk through the Gospel According to Luke, a journey that began at Christmas and carried us all the way through Easter. Beginning today, and for the rest of the summer, we're going to be working our way through another book of the bible called The Acts of the Apostles, or simply Acts for short.

One way to think about the Book of Acts is volume II of the Gospel of Luke, because most bible scholars around the world agree that both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts were written by the same author.

As we begin our walk through Acts today, you'll notice that even though we're in Acts 1, we pick up the story pretty much right where we left off last week in Luke 24. So with that background in mind, listen now for a Word from God.

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 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. 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; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

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

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

"Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

"Are we there yet?"

I submit to you that these two questions are different ways of expressing the same sentiment. There's somewhere we wish to be. There is a set of conditions that we'd like to see come to pass. But we're not there yet, and we'd like to know how much longer until we get there.

In the disciples' case, they weren't asking about how much time was left on a road trip. For nearly 900 years, the Land of Promise had been ruled by one succession after another of foreign empires. The Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, and the Greeks had all ruled over Israel. And now, the Romans were in charge militarily, economically, and politically.

And so here are the disciples, who have seen Jesus crucified, with the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate affixing a sign above him that read, "The King of the Jews," so that there might be no mistaking what happens should anyone dare to challenge Rome's power.

But here's Jesus, resurrected, in the flesh, having spent the last six weeks with them doing his two favorite activities – teaching about the kingdom of God, and eating.

And so they ask this question, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

And Jesus doesn’t give a direct answer. He doesn’t give them an exact date and time or a set of conditions that must come to pass first. He simply says, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.”

But then Jesus does something else. He gives a promise. He says, “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.”

And if there’s a thesis statement for the Book of Acts, there it is. The rest of the Book of Acts really is about the fulfillment of that promise – the spread of the good news about Jesus Christ from Jerusalem out to Judea and up to Samaria and even to the ends of the earth.

IV

Are we there yet? My friend, I suspect that in your heart of hearts, you’re asking some version of that question this morning.

When will the pandemic finally end?

When will I be able to once again see the people and go to the places that mean so much to me?

When will this season of grief in my life begin to abate?

When will that broken relationship begin to heal?

When will I be free of this pain in my body, in my mind, in my soul?

When will the bitterness and division in our country and our community and in our neighborhoods and homes begin to subside?

When will the dream of a nation of liberty and justice for all finally become a reality?

Are we there yet?

How I wish, my friend, I could give you a specific date and time, or at least a set of conditions for which to anticipate. How I wish I had a firm answer to those questions.

But I do not, and according to Jesus, it’s not for me or you to know the periods that the Father has set by his own authority.

I cannot offer you answers. But I can point you two promises that Jesus makes to you.

You will receive power from the Holy Spirit. You will. That’s a promise. When you think you can’t stand another minute, when you think you can’t go another step, when you think you’ve reached the end of you, the Holy Spirit will give you power.

You may not recognize it when it happens. The Holy Spirit, in my experience, is sneaky like that. Sometimes the Spirit shows up in the form of a word from a friend at just the right moment. Sometimes the Spirit shows up in a snippet of a song, or the beauty of the night sky, or in a still small voice, or in a thousand different ways.

But you will receive power from the Holy Spirit. And you absolutely positively will not wait alone. That's the first promise.

The second promise is this. You will be Jesus' witness.

In our Presbyterian way of being the church, sometimes we get a little uneasy with words like "witness" and "testimony." But in this very pulpit just last Sunday, two young men and one young woman witnessed to Jesus Christ, offering their testimonies. They shared with you what they have seen and heard in their own lives and what they have come to believe to be true about Jesus Christ.

My friend, you don't need a pulpit to be a witness for Jesus Christ. You don't need for the time and place to be just right. You will be Christ's witness, here and now, right where you are.

When you refuse to give in to cynicism and despair, you are Christ's witness.

When you refuse to meet hate with hate and violence with violence, you are Christ's witness.

When you choose to do what you know is right, even when you know it will not be popular, you are Christ's witness.

When you reach out so someone who is suffering, and you share with them how the power of the Holy Spirit has showed up in surprising and grace-filled ways when you've been in a similar spot, you are Christ's witness.

Are we there yet? I don't know. But I know this. You will receive power, and you will be Christ's witness. That is a promise.

V

And that promise isn't just for you. It's for all of us. It's for we who call ourselves Christ's church.

We don't know what the future holds. But we know and we worship and we serve the One who holds the future.

And we trust in his promises.

We trust that there will come a day when the pandemic is but a distant memory.

We trust that there will come a day when phrases like "social justice" aren't just another battleground in the never-ending culture wars, but the lived reality of everyone with whom we share this planet – that we live socially and justly together.

We trust that there will come a day when death and mourning and crying and pain will be no more, a day when God will wipe every tear from every eye, and there will be no more night, for God's own self will be the light.

Are we there yet? It is not for us to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.

But until that day comes, we will be Christ's witnesses through the power of the Holy Spirit, even to the ends of the earth.

Thanks be to God. Amen.