

LIVING ROOMS - 360° HOSPITALITY

Epiphany

Luke 10:38-42

A Sermon Preached by
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University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture – Read by Liturgists

Listen for the word of God.

Luke 10:38-42¹

Now as the disciples went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

And so it is written that

"... those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall rise up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not grow weary, they shall walk and not faint."²

This morning and in this time together, we are invited to reflect on waiting – waiting and how do we wait well. I mean not how do we wait impatiently and with struggle and with frustration and wanting it to be over, but that kind of waiting that the prophet Isaiah writes about. A waiting that said that "I waited upon the Lord and God renewed my strength and I rose up with wings like eagles, I ran and I was not weary." What's that kind of waiting? And what's that kind of waiting invite us to today? And I wonder for you and for me, where are you waiting? Where are *you* waiting in your life today?

And by that I mean this: I mean where in our lives has something ended, something over, something we put down? Perhaps it was a dream. Perhaps it was a relationship. Perhaps it was an idea of what we should be doing. Perhaps it was a home we had. Perhaps it was a something in your life that now you look back on and said, well, that time/season/thing is now over. And whatever that new beginning out there is before you, well you don't even have a clue about what that is or where that is or how to get there. Where are you and where am I in our lives waiting?

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. .

² Ibid., Old Testament. Isaiah 40:31.

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All year in worship we're following this big arc that we began way back in September when it was sunny and warm. You remember those days. And on those warm sunny days in September we started a journey. And we talked about the first thing you got to do on a journey is get ready to go. And instead of talking about everything we wanted to bring with us, we reflected all fall on what we needed put down and leave behind so that we were light enough to go.

And then in Advent we reflected on leaving. Just that time that we were ready or not but we just went – or we had to go – and we moved.

And during these seasons of Epiphany and Lent, we are in the in-between. Now there is *hope* out there that Easter *is* coming. But Easter's a long way off. It's *months* away. And in Eastertide, that season after Easter, we'll reflect on a journey home. The *end* of a journey. And everything that at this point we could anticipate about being ... Ah! There will be a party! This will feel great! I'm so happy! ... But we're not there yet. And in this season of Epiphany, as this season draws to a close and we begin Lent in just a few weeks, we're in this in-between time. You may have even forgotten that you're on a journey. You may have even forgotten that we're doing this whole arc this year of travel and journey because we are *in* the time of waiting and we are in the of time of in-between, when perhaps it feels to you and to me like, well, nothing, nothing much of anything is happening. Where are you waiting in your life today between that which was and this that is yet to be?

Will you join me in prayer.

God,
We come today as we are
in the in-between that is our lives
and in all of the impatience,
in all of thanksgivings,
in all of the sorrow and
in all of the joy of this day and this time.
God just quiet us down enough to breathe again,
to just be here and now
and with you
to find our place
and to find our way
in this time of in-between.
– Amen

And so on that day you were out there on the lake. And the lake was full of white-capped waves. And you were heeled way back in your little sailboat. And the sail was full and taut. And you were diving in and out of all these other boats at play in the lake. And then ... You slipped right behind the shadow of that island, on the leeward side of the island, which meant that there was no wind anymore and those topsails suddenly fluttered and they fell, and your boat drifted and came to a stop.

Now you could look out there and you could see all of those whitecapped waves and all of those people screaming and playing in the wind. That's not where you are. Instead of whitecapped waves that water has turned glassy smooth, perfectly reflecting in upside down reflections of the pine trees on the island.

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You sit there in your little boat and you say, "What the heck did I do wrong? I mean, how did I end up here? And how do I get back out there?" And you're frustrated and you lean down and you wonder what to do. And you see an oar. And you reached out and you're goin' to pick up the oar and muscle your way out there into the lake again and out into the wind. And for a moment some voice in your head says "Stop! ... Just stop for a minute. Before muscling your way through, maybe there is something to be found here in this time of in-between."

Many years ago, Bill Bridges wrote a book called *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*.³ I have given that book away to many people and perhaps I have shared it with you as well. For it's a great little book that talks about this mystery that we don't know much about, and that is: How do people get from here to there. Well, we do it all the time, but how do we do it? is a great mystery. And Bridges tries to make sense along the way of these various patterns of what makes sense of a journey. He talks about endings and how hard it is to have an ending. And perhaps in your life and mine holding on to endings that we are not ready for yet and do not want to have yet, because we already know what's before us. *This* time that Bridges calls the "neutral zone". The neutral zone. It's the time when it seems like nothing much is happening and we wonder how to get *there* where we want to be and hope to be, which is the journey's end and we're on, out into the waves and into our new life.

In the middle of Jesus' life, in that short time of his ministry of those three years, he wanders into the house of Mary and Martha. And while you and I have probably heard many sermons reflecting on "Are you a Mary kind of person that runs around and does all these things to get ready while the guest is there or are you ... [correction] I'm sorry ... a *Martha* kind of person running around doing all that. Or are you a *Mary* kind of person who leans back and just wants to listen to Jesus, reflecting on male and female roles at the time.

I want to do something different today, because I think the heart of this text is not whether we're a *Martha* person or a *Mary* person. Of course both are needed. The running around is needed. The setting the table is needed. And the sitting and just being with the guests is needed as well. But the key question, the real question is always what are you supposed to be doing now? I mean right now: what are you supposed to be doing?

Bridges says in the time of the in-between, the thing we have to most importantly is surrender. Surrender. Well, there is some bad news! What do you mean "surrender"? You know, in order to die you have to do one thing: you have to stop trying. And that's why it's so hard, why it's so hard for so many – and perhaps for us, too – to die to the things we need to die to, because we don't know how to stop trying. It's like in our DNA: We know how to do; we know how to accomplish; we know how to march; we know how to yell; we know how to set the table. How in the heck do you stop trying? And doesn't it just feel like failure when you do? But Bridges says it's the most essential part of this middle time of the neutral zone, the middle part of our journey. Just stop trying. Because what you're doing running around and doing all that *Martha* part of you is not doing helpful things at this time. You've got to stop.

³ William Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes, 2nd Edition*. 2004. Da Capo Press, Boston, MA; <https://www.dacapopress.com>.

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You know one of the other great mysteries of life, besides transitions, is how in the world the Polynesians discovered Hawaii. I mean, how in the heck were they so good to *find* that spot, the most isolated spot in the world! What is it? some 2000 miles from the nearest point of land. But they set out and they could have missed it, right, so many times. But they found it. How in the world did they do it?

Well, there're many stories about how they found their way and looked at the birds and the waves and so forth. But my favorite story is that the Polynesians, first of all, they surrendered. They sat there in their canoe. They grounded themselves right there. Looked out at their crew, looked out at the waves. They surrendered to going anywhere. And the islands came rolling in to them.

Now, of course, we know that it also took a lot of that muscling and pushing through to get to that place, but the key part of that story is the first thing they had to do was stop and just surrender. And I wonder what that means for you and for me at this time in our lives of in-between? What it might mean to stop doing and just surrender – and trust that the islands, indeed, will come rolling in to yo?.

One of the great risks of the in-between – and we do it all the time – is we run to our ending. We run to "Oh! This is it!" "Oh, this must be it!" "Oh, thank goodness, it's the end of the story!" And we run in too soon. And Bridges says the hardest thing is to hold that space and that time, for that ending of the story. That new beginning. That new beginning will come, but it will come in *its* time and not necessarily on your and my agenda.

And finally what he says is there are things, actually, you *can* do. But instead of just thinking about everything you need to do to get *there*, you should *stop* in this place in between and do a 360. I mean, just look around. Just look around at what is here.

How often in your life and mine do we even do that? I mean, do we even just look around at what is in the horizon? We're sometimes so focused on getting there, we don't see what's over here ... or over here ... or over here. And so Bridges has his favorite ways to do that, and you know yours as well. Do a 360. Just look around. Maybe it's some time alone. Maybe it's in your life saying, "I have no time to be alone" to imagine again how might you get some aloneness, to just look around and listen to your heart.

Perhaps, he says, it's a good time to write your autobiography. What an idea! I've been struggling at that, these last years, writing a story. The gift of writing the story of your life is this. Sometimes, yes, you get to see patterns and ways of being in the world; but more so you get to see the mystery that you've lived in. And what a wonder! What a *wonder* life is! Your life and mine. And this strength as well: if you're in the in-between in your life remember this, you've done this journey. You've done it really well sometimes and sometimes you haven't done it really well. But you've done it and you have learned along the way how to get from that which was to that which is yet to be. And together, together might we support each other as church to make that journey together.

You know, it was one of those days out on the lake. And there *was* great wind, and then the wind died, that day on the boat with Cathy and with Jim. We were drifting there, and I thought, "Oh, my goodness. I wonder if we'll ever get back?" I probably wanted them to say, "Come! Sit on this side of the boat. We'll try to catch any wind we can." Or "Come sit on that side of the boat." Or "Pick up the oar." But before I could do any of those things, an *eagle* flew overhead. And I said to Cathy and Jim,

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"I have never seen an eagle out here." The thing is, perhaps there're always eagles flying over Lake Union, but it took that time of stilling to notice that they were there. Friends, in this time of in-between in your life and in mine, may we pause and look up and notice and [look] around. The eagles are flying. We're going to find our way to that next place; it's just not right now.

Prayer:

In hope and in prayer and with the strength of those who have gone before us and shown us the way through, thanks be to God. —

Amen

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Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2018/1/28/2018