

WAITING WELL

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Acts 1:1-11

In October 1347, twelve ships docked at the port of Messina which is on the island of Sicily off the coast of Italy. The ships had sailed from Crimea in the Black Sea and were carrying merchandise from Asia. In Messina, port authorities were horrified to discover that most of the sailors on board these ships were dead, and that those who were still living were covered with black boils that oozed pus and blood. The ships were ordered to leave the harbor. But it was too late. The Black Death had established its foothold in Europe.

Over the next five years, over 20 million people in Europe—about one-third of the continent's population—would die from this disease. At the time, they called it the Great Pestilence or just the Pestilence. In Latin it was the *magna mortalitas*, the Great Death. Today, we know it as the Bubonic Plague.

The plague terrorized Europe for five years. It eventually subsided but was never eradicated. Every several generations it would resurface in waves and kill more people. It wasn't until sanitation and public health practices improved that the Black Death began to fade.

The bacterium that causes the disease was not identified until 1894.¹ For 500 years, people had no concept how this terrible disease spread. They didn't know about the rats that carried infected fleas—fleas that would bite people and transmit the disease. They did quickly discover that the disease could successfully be isolated. In 1377, just thirty years after the outbreak in Sicily, in the city that is now Dubrovnik, Croatia (which at the time was an Italian port), they learned to isolate the sailors on inbound ships for 30 days to determine if they showed any signs of the disease. Eventually, they realized that they should extend that period of isolation to 40 days. In the Italian language, 40 days is a *quarantina*.

In England, the last major occurrence of the Black Death took place in 1665. They called it The Great Plague, and it killed an estimated 100,000 people—mostly in London.²

In September of that year, 1665, a young man named George Viccars traveled from the village of Eyam in Darbyshire to London. George was a tailor's assistant, and he had gone to London purchase bolts of cloth to bring back to his boss. Tragically, the cloth he purchased was infested with fleas carrying the plague

¹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1198743X14608582>

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2020/03/02/bubonic-plague-coronavirus-quarantine-eyam-england/>

bacterium. Within a week, Viccars was dead. Within six weeks, 29 residents of his village had also died.

When winter arrived to the village, the disease subsided and everyone believed it was gone. But in the spring, the disease returned. In June, the rector of the parish church realized that something needed to be done to contain this disease. Eyam was a small village, but it lay on an important trade route between Sheffield and Manchester. If the plague got into these cities then thousands would surely die.

The priest partnered with the town's retired Puritan minister, and together they appealed to the people that the village should voluntarily isolate itself from the outside world. The obvious downside, of course, is that doing this would increase the probability of their own deaths. However, they would protect the lives of many others. The people agreed.

For the next fourteen months, no one went in or out of this village. A ring of stone markers was placed in a one mile radius around the village designating the quarantine zone. Food was brought from other villages and left at the stones where the people of Eyam would place gold coins soaking in vinegar.

Deaths in Eyam skyrocketed. One woman, Elizabeth Hancock, buried her husband and six children in less than a month. The rector who initiated this quarantine lost his wife as well. In all, of the 800 residents of Eyam, 260 died—a mortality rate twice that of London. But the act of self-sacrifice was successful. The plague did not spread to nearby towns, and in November 1667, the quarantine was lifted.

Two-hundred years later, a descendant of a survivor wrote a history of the village. Here, he declared, “The immortal victors of Thermopylae and Marathon have no stronger claim to the admiration of succeeding generations than the villagers of Eyam; who in a sublime, unparalleled resolution gave up their lives — yea: doomed themselves to pestilential death to save the surrounding country.”³

What was it like for the people of that village to go into quarantine? To agree to wait for an indefinite length of time? To wait knowing that waiting may result in their own deaths? To wait as family and loved ones and neighbors died all around them? To just wait? But yet they did; and they saved lives. They waited with purpose. They waited well.

No one likes to wait. We especially don't like to be kept waiting. When someone is late to meet us, we are forced to do nothing, to wait. We consider this as wasted time. Waiting causes time to stand still. We can't do anything. We're stuck in a moment waiting for some event over which we have no control. Many of us have felt that way for the past two months as we have self-isolated during the pandemic.

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2020/03/02/bubonic-plague-coronavirus-quarantine-eyam-england/>

We're stuck in this holding pattern of not being able to make plans. It can be frustrating.

As we see in our reading for today, the apostles found themselves in a similar situation when they were instructed by Jesus to wait in Jerusalem. They had been following Jesus for years but then he had been crucified by the authorities. Against all odds, he came back from death. He then spent 40 days with them teaching them about the kingdom of God. During this time, he *ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father.*

What does it mean that they were to wait for God's promise? How long would they need to wait? Jesus does not say. All that he tells them is that in not too many days, they would be *baptized with the Holy Spirit*. But the disciples wanted to know more. What are they waiting for? They ask Jesus, *Is now the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*

One-thousand years earlier, Israel had been a nation of distinction ruled by the remarkable King David. But over the centuries, the kingdom splintered. The northern part was loast to the Assyrians; the southern part defeated by the Babylonians. By the time Jesus is born, the nation had been subsumed into the sprawling Roman Empire. When the disciples ask, *Is now the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?* They are echoing the pounding desire of the people—that the Romans be evicted, that Jews reclaim their land, that the kingdom of Israel be restored.

But the promise of God is not about reclaiming political power or restoring the past glory of the people. God's promise is something else. The disciples are told they must wait—wait to receive the Holy Spirit. When they ask Jesus *when*, when will this time come for us, he answers them that that time is wholly up to God. They must wait. When God is ready, the Holy Spirit will come to them and send them into the world proclaiming the message of Jesus.

As Luke describes, Jesus had taken the disciples outside of the city to a hill. Then, as they are all watching, something happens. Jesus departs. *He [is] lifted up, and hidden by a cloud*. This cloud is not some sort of heavenly escalator. It is God. God embraces Jesus and then takes him from their sight.

The disciples respond to this event the same way that any of us would. They stand there staring at where Jesus had been. I like to imagine that their mouths are hanging open in confusion and disbelief. Suddenly, two men are there with them. The men are wearing white clothing which is a hint to us that they are angels—messengers from God. They say to the disciples, *What are you doing standing there staring towards the sky? Jesus, who was taken from you into heaven, will return to you in the same way.*

We call this event The Ascension—Jesus being taken to heaven. We recognize The Ascension on the fortieth day after Easter—that length of time that Jesus spent with his followers after his resurrection—their time of being quarantined together. Today is Ascension Sunday.

Ascension Sunday marks the start of our own waiting. The angels told the disciples that Jesus would return in the same way that they saw him go. Since then, Christians have been waiting for what we call the Second Coming—the return of Christ.

Waiting for Christ is not about doing nothing. We must wait well. We must wait with purpose. Christian waiting involves prayer and worship and study of the scriptures. It calls for acts of compassion and love. As we wait, we should be building the kingdom.

We think of the account of Jesus' Ascension and the words of the angels that he will return in the same way. I'm not sure that we understand that correctly. I believe that Jesus' return is not Jesus coming back to us, but us being welcomed by him. I like to look at the Second Coming as our Ascension, of our being embraced by God, of our entry into the kingdom.

I would urge you all to use your quarantine to reflect on how it is that you wait. Are you waiting well? Are you building the kingdom?