

"Are We There Yet?"

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³After his suffering [Jesus] presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While 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; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

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

¹²Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. ¹³When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. (Acts 1:3-14)

It is one of the most stereotypical scenarios of family life. The Family Truckster is rolling down the road, with miles to go before you sleep, and the whine you've been dreading issues forth from the back seat: "**Are we there yet?**"

Most of us hear that question from the perspective of a parent -- a tired driver who knows that the road is long and we still have a long way to go. We hear the words as impatient bellyaching fueled by sore bottoms and short attention spans. However, if we try to understand the question from the perspective of the tired and frustrated children in the backseat, if we hear the words with fresh ears and open hearts, we might actually find some empathy for the inquiring passengers. In fact, my favorite "Are We There Yet?" cartoon does not put the question in the mouth of a child. It is voiced instead by a religious adult. The cartoon shows two men sitting cross-legged in front of a cave at the top of a mountain, and a sign above them reads "The Road to Nirvana." A younger man looks intently at the older, bearded sage to his right, asking repeatedly, "Am I there yet? Huh? Am I? Am I there yet?" The only answer given by the teacher is that same furrowed brow of frustration worn by every parent who has ever been asked that question.¹

Yes, even adults get weary on the road, especially on the road to enlightenment. We too want to know when we'll "get there." So we can sympathize with these disciples on the Mount of Olives, who have come so far. Beginning in childhood, they have heard the

¹ Corbett, Jack. "The road to Nirvana." <https://www.cartoonstock.com>.

promises that the days are surely coming when God will restore the fortunes of God's people. They have not only heard the promises that a righteous branch will be raised up,² but actually seen the One they believe is the Branch literally raised up – raised up as a teacher and leader, raised up as the hope of Israel, then raised up on a cross, and now raised up from the dead. Surely this is the time for the Branch to take his place as king, to fulfill the prophecy of justice and righteousness in the land, to restore the glory and nationhood of Israel as the prophets said he would. For these disciples, the timing of these things has never been clear. They don't really know whether they should be looking for God's kingdom to be realized now, *within history*, or in some way after, or *beyond history*.³ They don't know whether the restoration of David's kingdom is a political reality or a spiritual one. Standing before Christ, a man who they saw die within human history, but who is also somehow beyond death and history, these hopes are all kind of muddled together. But either way, as spiritual seekers, they seem perfectly justified in asking the risen Christ, "***Aren't we there yet?***"

We still sit uneasily in this tension – the uncomfortable idea that in some ways, the reign of God is real and present in us and in the world ***right now***; but in other ways – in many other ways --- God's righteousness and justice have a long way to go. In 1 John 3:2, this tension between the "now" and the "not yet" is laid out plainly. "*Beloved, we are God's children **now**...*" the verse begins. But then it continues, "*... what we will be has **not yet** been revealed.*" In other words, in our lives of discipleship, we always feel a little like those impatient kids in the backseat. When the road is long, and we grow tired, we ask that question that recurs throughout the psalms: How long? Aren't we there yet?

Jesus does not answer this question, at least not directly. "*It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority,*" he says. In other words, "I cannot tell you when we'll get there. That information is beyond your capacity to understand. What I can do is offer you two travel tips for the rest of the journey."

The first is that we will not be alone. Specifically, we will "receive power" from the Holy Spirit. It is the same promise Jesus offers in the gospel of John when he is about to leave the disciples. "Where I am going, you cannot come."⁴ But "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate." He will "be with you forever." He will abide with you and be in you. The gift of the Holy Spirit is the gift of knowing that God is always with us, working through us, with the very power of God. On the road, we will never be alone.

The second thing is that we have a job to do while we travel. Out there, "you will be my witnesses," Jesus says. Jesus calls us to bear witness to him in a legal sense (as people who testify to the truth), in a historical sense (as people who can share the story of Jesus with accuracy and depth), in an ethical sense (as disciples with the will and the courage to pick up our own crosses and follow the path of Jesus).⁵

The physical scope of this witness is also broad. For those first disciples, and for us, it begins at home. "***You will be my witnesses in all Judea,***" Jesus says. Judea represents the known and comfortable place of our childhood. In a sense, this makes witnessing easier, because we know the sites, the people, and the patterns of home. But it can also be hard,

² Jeremiah 23:5

³ Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr. *Christian Doctrine*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox (1994), p. 384.

⁴ John 8:21

⁵ Strong's 3144, *martus*, <http://biblehub.com/greek/3144.htm>

witnessing at home. For example, when Jesus witnessed in Nazareth, the hometown crowd started out proud but quickly turned on him and tried to throw him off a cliff. Home is where old, established patterns are the hardest to break, where repentance and change can be the hardest thing to do.

Then, Jesus says, "***You will be my witnesses in Samaria.***" This is distinctly not home. It is the opposite of home. Jews hated Samaritans just as much as Samaritans hated Jews. In a recent sermon on the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Barbara Brown Taylor equates the Samaritan with "the last person in the world you want to call good... the last person in the world you would want to give you CPR... the kind of person you would hate to thank for saving your life."⁶ This is the witness of the disciple on the road – the call to go even to the place you hate the most... and to witness love even to your most hated enemy.

Last, but certainly not least, Jesus says, "***You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.***" There is no mountain too high, no road too long, no place too remote. No one can go everywhere or do everything, but every disciple is meant to be stretched. Each of us is called to push the boundaries of what we think is possible for us.

So, no, we are not there yet. We were reminded of this fact this week in a powerful way, when eight-year-old Saffie Rose Roussos, described by her school principal as "a beautiful little girl in every aspect of the word," never made it home from her first concert.⁷ A bomb designed, positioned and detonated with hatred extinguished her light in a pointless act of evil. No, we are not there yet.

The day after the attack in Manchester, the families of 17-year-old Chloe Rutherford and her boyfriend Liam Curry were still waiting for word. Family members gathered in their home church, Saint Hilda's in South Shields, to pray for the safe return of their loved children. "We're off to Manchester as a family," a spokesman wrote on Facebook, "to hopefully collect our two most precious people wherever they are. Stay strong... we are coming for you!"⁸ Unfortunately, the confirmation they later received in Manchester was far from a happy ending. No, we are not there yet.

And on this Memorial Day weekend, as we give thanks for those who have paid the ultimate price for our freedom, that we and the world might live in peace, still we live in a world that is far from peaceful, where danger and violence and ill-will still haunt millions of people around the globe. No, we are not there yet.

In all of these ways, we are still asking when we might get there – when we might leave in our rear view mirror the painful realities of this world -- the sting of senseless tragedy, the power of evil, the ache of broken relationships, the terrible cost of pernicious disease. Jesus has not answered that question for us. We have not been told how long the ride to peace, justice and righteousness will be. But he does assure us that we will never face these difficulties alone, that the power and presence of the Holy Spirit will always be with us as we meet the challenges of this life.

And Jesus also calls us to witness as we wait. Through it all, Jesus says, I need you to be my committed witnesses -- to tell the story and live the story of the enduring power of God's love and forgiveness -- in the familiarity of home, in the challenges of uncomfortable places, even to the ends of the earth. **Amen.**

⁶ Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Right Answer," www.youtube.com, accessed May 26, 2017.

⁷ <http://www.cnn.com/interactive/2017/05/world/manchester-terror-attack-victims/>

⁸ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/05/23/pls-help-frantic-parents-hunt-missing-kids-manchester-concert/>