It was, for most of us, pretty much a “non-event.” We did not decorate our homes, or entertain family and friends. We did not have the day off from work, or fix a special meal to celebrate. And, unlike Christmas and Easter when the church is packed, and there are signs and symbols of the birth and resurrection everywhere, this past Thursday there was no one here. There were no choir anthems sung, no organ music played, no bulletins handed out, no sermons preached in this stone sanctuary to mark the Ascension of Jesus on Thursday.

Looking at the lack of Ascension Day celebrations in most protestant churches in the United States, one might almost think that the ascension was no big deal. But in many places and throughout the history of the church, the Ascension of Jesus has been considered a major day in the Christian calendar – a day that brings everything full circle. God came down to earth in Jesus. The incarnation. Then Crucifixion. Death. Burial. Resurrection. And now, Ascension to Heaven. It’s a day that not only explains why there’s no body of Jesus left on earth, but a day that also testifies to and illumines who Jesus is.

I suspect that part of the reason we down play this event in the church is because the cosmology that underlies the story in Acts is that it does not “square” with what we know to be reality. The story of the ascension as it appears in the passage from Acts read just a moment ago, presupposes a 3 level universe. Heaven is directly above earth, earth is right here where we are, and hell is directly down there. But we all know that if you dig deep into the ground, you might hit rock and maybe water, but you don’t hit the fires of hell. And similarly, we know that just above the earth are satellites, planets, moons, stars and suns. And Jesus zipping around like George Jetson or Buzz Lightyear seems very odd to us…unbelievable, maybe.

Whether Jesus actually flew upwards on a cloud or not isn’t all that important to me. What is far more important is the central affirmation of the ascension. What’s important aren’t the trappings, or the wrappings, of the story, but the message and meaning that are at the core of my affirmation that Jesus ascended into heaven. The ascension of Jesus, you see, affirms that Jesus is now sitting at the right hand of God; that Jesus is one with God; and thus, that Jesus’ love, forgiveness and power are not bound by the limits of time and place, but that his love and forgiveness and power are available to us all, always, even to the end of time.

According to Luke in the book of Acts, the resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples for a period of 40 days after being raised from the dead. During that time of teaching and being with them he told them that they should wait and remain in Jerusalem until they had been empowered by God’s Spirit. On the 40th day, the disciples asked him, “Lord, are you about to restore the kingdom of Israel?” (Acts 1:6) They were asking if finally their land would be returned to them; if finally their lives would be secure; if Jesus was finally going to drive the Romans out, and put the religious authorities and those who were powerful in their rightful places.

Jesus told those disciples that it was not for them to know such things. However, he did say to them that they had a mission to do: to witness throughout the world to what they had seen and heard through Jesus. But he did not tell them to run right out and start testifying immediately; instead, he told them to wait; to wait until the God’s spirit empowered them; to wait in Jerusalem.

Having said this, Jesus was lifted up toward the heavens on a cloud. He flew up, up, up, until the disciples could no longer see him. As they stood there with their mouths wide open, and eyes fixed upon the sky in amazement and astonishment, 2 angels appeared and said, “Why are you looking up? This Jesus who has been taken up into heaven will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:11) The disciples then turned their gaze away from skies and back to earth. And with their gaze fixed upon earth again, they journeyed back to Jerusalem as Jesus told them, and there they waited as Jesus instructed. They waited with “certain women” and with Jesus’ brothers’ too.

Even though Jesus’ love, forgiveness and power was available to those first disciples because he had ascended – as it is available to us – and even though they clearly had a mission to do, as we have, they needed to wait. They needed to wait for God. They needed to wait for power. They needed to wait for Spirit. But while they waited, they stayed together and they prayed. They didn’t just go about their daily lives as if Jesus had never happened. They didn’t scatter to the winds. They didn’t just sit around, twiddling their thumbs. Their waiting was active and expectant.

I suppose God could have sent the Spirit immediately. But God didn’t. Those early followers had to wait. As Jesus was going upward, I suppose, the Spirit could have been descending downward and those first followers could have immediately started testifying to the world about the good news of Jesus Christ. But that’s not how God chose to arrange things. There would be a time of togetherness and prayer, fellowship and discernment, before they would be empowered to live out their God given mission.

Henri Nouwen once said something to the effect that, “Waiting is a period of learning. The longer we wait, the more we hear about him for whom we are waiting.” (Citation location unknown) For those first followers, surely their active waiting gave them the chance to reflect more deeply on what they had seen and experienced in Jesus Christ; surely their waiting gave them the opportunity to discern how God was calling them to live out their mission. And surely their waiting also reminded them that the Spirit wasn’t going to be their possession, or at their beck-and-call but that God’s Spirit is a gift, a gift sought back then and now in the prayers of the community of faith. Buttressed by the togetherness of those early followers and their devotion to prayer, their waiting wasn’t an empty time; it was a holy time.
Most of us don’t like to wait. Waiting often seems about as far from holy time as you can get. We see lines in the post office as an impediment to us doing what we know we need to get done. We get irritated and feel we have wasted time when we have a 4 hour window for the arrival of the washing machine repair person and they don’t arrive until the end of that window. And how many of us haven’t gone through the express line at the grocery store with 14 items rather than the maximum 12 in order to get on to the next thing on our agendas? No, we do not like to wait. We gripe about it. We do everything we can to avoid it.

But it occurs to me that perhaps sometimes waiting might be God’s calling, or even God’s gift. Waiting can sometimes can give us the chance to take stock of our lives, our hopes, our dreams; to look at the big picture that sometimes gets lost in the minutia of our lives. Waiting can be a time or us to turn to God anew to seek God’s dream for us and our world; it can be a time for us to turn to the community of faith again and there find new strength, hope, encouragement and love.

Of course, there are times when the church, and we as individuals, must act. Whenever people are hurting, we can’t wait to liberate. Whenever people are excluded, we can’t wait to include. Wherever people are hungry we can’t wait to offer food. However, maybe sometimes, we are called not just to do things, but are called to wait…called to wait expectantly, praying for guidance and direction, and asking for the Spirit of God to blow in us and through us to empower us for the journey ahead.

There are times when waiting can be an excuse to avoid that which we are afraid to do, or that which we may not want to do. I know, for instance, that I wait to clean the clutter in my home for as long as possible. But I don’t wait to clean the clutter because I’m seeking God’s guidance about what to do with the mess, nor do I wait to clean the clutter because I’m trying to discern how God wants me to do that job. My waiting is nothing but a way to avoid a task I do not like, and when waiting is avoidance, I don’t much think it is God’s gift or God’s calling.

But I do think there may be times that we people of faith are indeed called to step away from the busyness of the church, to step away together from the demands to do, and simply to wait…to wait with expectation and hope on God, to wait together, to wait together as God’s people in prayer, together seeking God’s guidance, together seeking together God’s vision, together seeking God’s power.

Surely not all waiting is God given or God called, but it seems to me that it might be possible that much of our waiting could become holy nonetheless. Waiting in line at the grocery store, we could pull out the smartphone we all carry, open up our Bible app, and read some scripture. Waiting for the child to finish soccer practice and we could bow our heads in prayer. Waiting for test results, a job offer, acceptance letter from a college, and we could turn to the community of faith in those times, and join the community in song, in study, and in prayer. Waiting. Waiting expectantly. Waiting
hopefully. Waiting prayerfully. Together as a people of faith.

Waiting can become an opportunity to remember anew God’s love in Jesus Christ and to learn God’s story. It can be a time to seek the Spirit’s guidance and to deepen our connections with God and with the Christian community. And when waiting is this, it is holy time and holy work.

Waiting. It’s not always an impediment. It may, in fact, sometimes be holy.