

In A Little While
John 16:16-20
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In the fall of 2000, the Irish rock band U2 released its tenth album, *All That You Can't Leave Behind*, to widespread acclaim. Containing a slew of hits, the album spoke to the American consciousness, particularly as people kept listening to it in the months following 9/11. It was described as having a “generous spirit” and being driven by “simplicity and soul.”¹ The sixth track on the album is a song called “In A Little While,” and like the rest of the album, it uplifts through dulcet tones and hopeful lyrics. I was in college when the song came out, and it quickly became a favorite of mine.

In 2002, DJ-turned-singer-songwriter Uncle Kracker also released a song called “In A Little While”—same title, different song, another upbeat but soothing tempo and another catchy melody. I was in grad school when the song came out, and it too quickly became a favorite of mine. Because the two songs had the same name and came out in such a short span, I always associated them with one another...but over the years, they have come to represent different sentiments to me.

Bono describes the U2 song as being about “the temporal nature of being,” pleasantly reflecting on the idea that we’re here relatively briefly while also marveling at the things that we accomplish in that time. Often, the song reminisces—about childhood and growth, about history and triumph. Bono rhymes “man dreams one day to fly/a man takes a rocket ship into the sky,” reminding us that the span between dream and reality fits in one generation.² Even as he looks back, though, he manages to look forward. This is a song about emerging from one’s aching or callowness, about breathing deep and feeling your heart beat, about anticipation.

Despite a poppy backbeat, the Uncle Kracker song does not look forward with joy—instead of hopeful anticipation, this narrator is wistfully melancholy; instead of reveling in growth, he is stuck in a rut. He sings “Sometimes I feel like something is gone here, something is wrong here, I don’t belong here,” and his “in a little while” suggests that the rut is going to continue: “in a little while I’ll be thinking about you/in a little while I’ll still be here without you.”³

Sometimes we use “in a little while” to convey forward-thinking optimism, and sometimes we use “in a little while” to convey time that should be moving forward but isn’t. Sometimes we use it to mean both at the same time. Jesus does the same.

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We are making our way through the back half of the gospel of John, fitting passages for the Easter season when we continue to focus on the resurrection of Christ. We are not making our way through the back half of the gospel of John *chronologically*. Some of the passages we’re studying take place before the crucifixion—Christ trying to tell his disciples about the resurrection before it happens—and some of the passages we’re studying take place during the

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_That_You_Can%27t_Leave_Behind

² “In A Little While,” U2.

³ “In A Little While,” Uncle Kracker.

resurrected Christ's reappearances on Earth. Last week was post-resurrection; this week is pre-crucifixion. I have great faith in your ability to keep everything straight in your minds, but I know it can seem a little muddled.

Part of why it can seem muddled is that the poor disciples in all of these stories are static characters despite the incredible acts unfolding around them: they are consistently just astonishingly thickheaded. Nearly every one of these narratives—including the ones during Jesus' arrest and trial and crucifixion—consists of Jesus trying to tell his disciples what is going on and them responding with something along the lines of "what do you mean?" It's almost as if they have an alternate take on reality.

In today's story, Jesus tries to tell them—again—that he will be killed but resurrected. His exact verbiage here is "In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me."

In the disciples' defense, this is something of an abstruse explanation. It sounds like maybe Jesus is going on vacation, or needs a break from them, or wants to play hide-and-seek. If anyone else said to us, "In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me," we would never think "oh, you're planning on dying and then coming back to life."

What we would do is to ask, "Where are you going?" That is the natural response to a statement like the one Jesus makes...but it is not what the disciples say, and this is where I think they come off as simpleminded. Instead of asking this (or any other) logical question, they keep asking, "What does he mean by 'a little while'?" They get stuck here before they can even wonder where Jesus might be going.

I have not historically had the greatest opinion of the disciples as an assembled collective—I tend to be pretty sympathetic to them as individuals, but when they start displaying groupthink and acting en masse, I become much more critical. And with this text, I definitely thought, "How could they not know what 'in a little while' means?" But when I thought about those pop songs that came out in a two-year span—thought about what each one was really saying—it was easier for me to abide the disciples' confusion.

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There are (at least) two different points of ambiguity for the disciples in trying to understand Jesus when he says "in a little while." The first is that the phrase nearly exclusively refers to an indefinite length of time. It is the amount of time between when a child asks for dessert and when a parent is ready to grant that request. "In a little while" is also a variable length of time, sometimes actually little and sometimes not so much. Sometimes, it is an unending length of time, marked only by a beginning and not by a conclusion, a polite way of saying "never."

We know this, and when we contemplate it, the disciples' question makes a little more sense. It's possible that they want to know whether Jesus literally means he'll be gone shortly or whether he's euphemistically saying goodbye forever.

John 16 is part of a series of chapters known as the Farewell Discourse, chapters where Jesus indeed does say goodbye to his followers. In this section, he accentuates the role that the Holy Spirit will soon play in their lives, offering comfort and guidance, direction and wisdom. The Holy Spirit will enable healing and compassion and truth, making those virtues accessible to humanity in ways that we previously missed out on.

The transition from Christ to Spirit is tricky for the disciples. They have benefited from having God-as-human walking among them, speaking their language, eminently relatable if occasionally surreptitious. Now they will have to rely on God-as-Spirit, much harder to understand, much more mysterious, much less concrete.

But because of the presence of the Holy Spirit, there is also an opportunity for humanity to understand the truths of God in ways that previously eluded us. We get to be newly exposed to the mysterious with a chance to glimpse it—and perhaps, fleetingly, to perceive it. The Holy Spirit allows us even to understand anew something as fixed as time itself by considering its value in previously unmeasurable ways.

This illuminates another layer of the disciples' query. When the author of the gospel of John uses the phrase "in a little while," he suggests (like U2 and Uncle Kracker) not only a length of time but also a quality of time. This is a biblical consistency: this phrase in all of our scriptures is only used to connote the passing of significant and meaningful time. When Jesus says "in a little while," he means that these times—the time up to his departure and the time while he is gone, both of them—will be important and weighty. These will be times that matter.

The disciples want to know both how long Jesus' "in a little while" will be and how it will be meaningful to them: will this "little while" be a pleasant reminiscing that allows hopeful anticipation? Or will it be dreary and heavy, time marked by a dark rut? With his word choice, Jesus says this time will matter; they want to know, "*How* will it matter?"

I like to think that this is what the disciples really care about when they say "what does he mean 'in a little while'?" They are learning, slowly, to understand the world differently. They aren't really asking "*how long* should we wait?" but rather just "*how* should we wait?"

The resurrection—the entire Easter season—teaches *us* to understand the world differently. Life can exist when we think it cannot. The law can include both justice and mercy. Sacrifice may not be about burning something, and loving God and loving one another may not look the way we thought it would look. Some choose to characterize Jesus primarily as a revolutionary, and it's not hard to see why. He completely reshuffles the physical, social, ethical, and spiritual structures of our world.

And he also overhauls our understanding of time. Jesus teaches us to think about time not as a measurable commodity but as the manifestation of the soul. He teaches us to value our time not because it is short or long but rather because, short or long, it is meaningful.

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When the coronavirus first hit us, over two years ago, the first sermon that I preached was titled "The Waiting Is The Hardest Part." (I promise that this is not that sermon with a new title, even if both were named after songs.) We were only a couple of weeks into the mysterious disease, the world pretty much collectively frozen, businesses shut down all over the place, everyone "sheltering at home." This was so early that we weren't wearing masks yet, and "Zoom" was only something you did before taking a photo. All that we knew to do at that stage was to wait: to avoid being around other people, to huddle in our homes and trust that, soon, this would all be over and we could return to normal.

We were told, back then, that we'd have to muster our strength and buckle down for just two weeks and then this illness would be behind us. We learned, quickly, that this was not exactly an accurate assessment of the situation. Two weeks turned into two months and, eventually, two years.

In the beginning, we were only waiting, because we didn't know what else to do. But the longer our expectancy lasted, the more we learned that our waiting had to be more than an indefinite passage of time. It also had to also have meaning. It had to matter.

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Jesus' actual answer when the disciples ask him "how will this time matter" is—big surprise here—convoluted and metaphorical...the more closely I read what Jesus says, the more sympathetic I am toward the confused disciples. He talks about grief and joy, suggesting that joy can (and will) come out of grief, as expected eschewing the disciples' original question. But he does include one line that sheds some light on things for them, using the metaphor of childbirth for the disciples' waiting—maybe not the most natural metaphor for a group of young men, but an effective one nonetheless.

When Jennifer was pregnant with each of our daughters, the best description for when they would arrive was "in a little while." We knew that they were coming, but we didn't know when. We knew that we could do some things to prepare for their arrival—buying baby gear, painting the room, reading up on parenthood—but that, for the most part, we would need to learn a lot on the job. In many ways, we were focused on the upcoming joy that was heading our way. In some ways we were fearful. And while I wouldn't say that this time in our lives ever felt like a rut, I will say there were some days (particularly near the end) when it felt like the present was so consuming that it was challenging to grasp the future cleanly.

It is the right metaphor for us to understand why Jesus says that "in a little while," he will be gone and that "in a little while" more, he will be back. For the disciples, both of those timeframes will be periods when they may be fearful but also when they can expect joy. They will try to take action but they will also have to wait. And they will find themselves so consumed by the present that it will be difficult to grasp the future. These will be timeframes that matter, and it's fine that the disciples ask "how will they matter," but Jesus' answer is basically, "they will matter in every single way that you can imagine."

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The main point of my virus sermon, over two years ago, was that we were going to have to wait for a little while, and that the waiting would be hard but that it could also be good. The problem was I didn't really know what "for a little while" was going to mean. None of us did.

As the calendar pages flipped, we learned—at least on some level—to understand that "in a little while" can mean more than fourteen letters typically would. We began, just a bit, to think about time in the same way that Jesus guided the disciples to think about it. We had to, in order to keep our wits about us. Counting down the weeks wasn't effective or healthy. Instead, we learned to make the most of any situation and to try to be grateful for any moment. Sometimes we were able to embrace anticipation built on past understanding; sometimes we were stuck in a rut, but regardless of the situation, we had to value the time.

We tried to do this even as our understanding of time became more and more fluid. We stopped keeping track of specific days. We aged differently. We altered the celebration of our normal markers of time like birthdays and holidays, occasionally observing them nowhere near when we typically would. We did the same for the important rituals of our faith like weddings and funerals and even the 11:00 church service.

Smack dab in the middle of it all was an intentional pursuit of hope. It wasn't always natural or easy, but it felt like one key to our survival was to continue to believe that we were moving in the right direction, that we were learning things about ourselves collectively and individually, and that, in the end, we would emerge on the other side. Sometimes we experienced this with a lilt in our song, and sometimes we experienced it with despondency, but we tried to find the hope throughout each steps of the journey. It didn't mean we were guaranteed anything. It just meant that the hope itself was valuable. It meant that our time, too, was primarily valuable as a conveyor of that hope, whether we were cheerful or dismal.

The value of time as a vehicle for hope is a lesson we learn over and over again. We learned it and continue to learn it through the crisis of the pandemic, through the intertwined experience of love and grief, through the cycle of life, even through catchy pop songs. We first learned it through the eternally enlightening mystery of the Holy Spirit and through Christ himself. He came to our world for just a little while, but his presence gave us hope that permeates throughout time.