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Ascension of Our Lord

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Lake Wobegon has a new interim pastor; at least that's what I've heard from the buzz on Facebook and Pastor Mueller's sermon a few weeks ago. It's true; the fictional town of Lake Wobegon has its first female pastor. Apparently it's still a big deal and causes quite a stir to have a women pastor in some areas, even though Lutherans have been ordaining women for more than 40 years. ☺

This new interim leader, Pastor Ham, is being met with mixed reviews by both the fictional congregational members of Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church and the real listeners to *Prairie Home Companion*. The church members are suspicious of how much she eats and worried about her preaching style—leaving the pulpit and preaching without a manuscript. Some radio fans are leery of Keillor and his sexist portrayal of women pastors, and wonder how he will develop this new character into someone who can give us insight into our own stereotypes.

Interim ministry is tough. I know, because this woman pastor has served as an Interim in three different congregations before I started serving at Holy Trinity. Because many people weren't familiar with the term Interim Pastor, and way too many people confused me with being an intern, I jokingly called myself a Buffer Pastor, meaning the one who fills up the pastoral space and time, so people have time to forget the previous pastor and make way for the new one to arrive.

But interim ministry involves more than simply filling a pulpit for a year or so between pastors. When congregations say goodbye to one pastoral leader and prepare for a new one it is often a year or so filled with much anxiety. During this "in between" time there is much reflecting on the past and an intentional look toward the future. There is also a great deal of wondering and hoping, mixed in with fear of the unknown. One of the things I learned early on is that the main task of an Interim Pastor is to be a non-anxious presence in the midst of change, conflict, and grief.

I can just imagine the great anxiety, conflict and grief experienced by the disciples during their 40 day interim between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension. During this "in between" time, the first followers of Jesus live through a major transition of faith as Jesus appears to them once again, recognizable, yet not the same. Imagine the changes they went through—first Jesus is alive, then dead, then somehow alive again. During this interim they must have been ecstatic that he was with them again, and yet still wonder about what might happen in the future.

They ask Jesus, "Is this the time that your kingdom is going to come?" Jesus says, "It is not for you to know that. . . . But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses." Then Jesus ascends to heaven, and two men in white robes ask the disciples, "Why are you looking up to heaven?"

And again, the disciples find themselves in another interim period between Jesus' ascension to heaven and his promised return. What will be the focus of this interim? Will they be stuck in the past and insist on doing what they've always done before? Or will they look only toward the future and the promise of new life?

In his commentary on the ascension, Pastor Peter Gomes insists that the event has both an upward vision and a downward vision. The upward vision is heaven: "I go to prepare a place for you." Amidst the troubles of this world, we want to be lifted up--we need an upward vision. We hope for a future that is better, or at least different than the one we have now.

But there is also the downward vision, expressed in the question, "Why are you looking up toward heaven?" In other words, there is more to do. Immerse yourself in the daily life of this world. Don't look up, but look around you and see your neighbor. Live fully in the present.

For this interim time, Jesus promises that he will send the Holy Spirit to enliven their witness in all the days to come. The awe-struck disciples are told to stop gawking up, to get their heads out of the clouds. Jesus promises that he will be with them to the close of the age. His body now gone, they will be his body. All of them. All of us.

We live in the interim, gripped by both an upward and a downward vision. If the disciples were told to stop gazing into heaven, I wonder what we would be told today? Stop living in the past and in the future? Claim the power of the Spirit that is within you? Open your eyes to the people in need? Tend to the earth and all of creation?

It can be difficult to live in this interim time between his ascension and our own resurrection. We, like the early disciples, ask questions, have doubt, worry about the future, cling to the past and wonder what it means to be a person of faith. Yet in the midst of it all we cling to the ultimate non-anxious presence, that no pastor could ever provide... the Holy Spirit is among us to calm our fears, dry our tears, and give assurance and hope at all times and in all places.

And on this feast day when we celebrate Jesus' going up to heaven, we proclaim that he comes down. Christ reveals himself in word and silence, in bread and wine, in the assembly gathered here and in the hopes and dreams that fill our imaginations. The risen Christ appears to us; nourishes us with holy food, and sends us forth as witnesses to all that we have seen and heard.