

Ants in Our Pants
On the Occasion of the Installation of JVLW to FPC, Durham
Acts 1:1-14 // November 17, 2019
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In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but wait there for the promise of the Father. ‘This,’ he said, ‘is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’

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

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath days journey away. When 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. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

There is no delight like John Weicher delight when it comes to energizers.
If you have not yet discovered this...just give him a minute.

Like a five year old who sees the Frozen 2 trailer for the first time (and for a 1000 times more), or a Philadelphia Eagles fan who wins in Dallas (sorry, I'm not quite savvy enough for the Carolina rivalries...however, for family loyalty's sake, Go Heels!).

It is in equal parts true beauty and utter awkwardness. (Pot/kettle, as Laurie correctly observed a few years back—I am full on awkward. No beauty. There is very little grace to these long limbs.) To give you a picture, When in full mode, John's got the iconic big red straw hat on his head, every move is done with fullest vigor, he's at least one sweaty t-shirt in—"clear eyes, full hearts, can't lose". When you love Jesus and Jesus' people enough, ain't no thing to make a fool of yourself dancing. It's all in a good day of ministry.

And these are some of the best days, are they not?

When we can be silly for God's sake.

When the auditorium goes crazy recognizing the intro drum cadence to Waving Flag. When playing board games is considered work. When the slip and slide at Massanetta is just one more remembrance of baptism.

When we get to bear witness with full power and Spirit-assuredness that what God is doing in this place is darn good.

That's surely what it feels like to be here this afternoon.

What God is doing among you, FPC Durham, is darn good.

And I'm not talking only about your great choice in calling John Weicher to be your Associate Pastor. Though clearly, I am 100% on board.

No, more than this, much more; for he has told me about you all.

(We preachers talk.)

He's told me of your commitment to formation here in this place, and purposeful relationship with neighbors around you.

Your embrace of all people, *all* people, embodying the heart of God.

Your care for one another that holds you through
unimaginable tragedy and into the hope of joy again.

“Love in the heart of Durham.”

What God is doing among you, is darn good.

I wonder if the apostle’s could have imagined it standing there on Olivet: A day’s walk away from the safe haven of the upper room; one resurrection, forty days and a lifetime away from the assurance that Jesus would handle it—whatever *it* happened to be that particular day. Stormy seas, empty nets, hemorrhaging women, hangry crowds, pesky questions.

Standing there with their feet planted and their eyes looking upward—they were a mixture of confidence and nerves.

Maybe more nerves than confidence in that moment, given their last recorded question, “Are we there yet?”

(John’s got to go. Andrew’s touching me. Thomas touched me first!)

If you haven’t yet been in a car on your way to an imagined picnic to the tune of “Ants Marching” by Dave Matthews Band, I’ll say again, just give John a minute. This is what you’ve signed up for.

Ok sure, that’s not exactly what they said.

My Greek is a little rusty.

But it may as well be.

Are we there yet?

“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?”

This is neither unfair nor irrelevant for them to ask. They thought of course, along with a whole lot of others, that the coming of the spirit of God meant the restoration of the kingdom—that was, a political restoration for Israel.

They would be tops again after so many many years of Roman suppression, oppression, aggression. They’re antsy to see this change. They’ve been through enough of the bad stuff. The trauma of state-sanctioned violence lingers. They’re eager to hold in their hot little hands just what this “promise of the Father” will present itself to be.

Ant party! Ant party! Ants in their pants! Ants in their pants! (We've made it to the picnic of our energizer now.) It's supposed to happen now, right now, let's get going Jesus...

Are we there yet?

Church, we can feel it, can we not? The discomfort. The world and the church are both a mess and a blessing, don't we know it. Some days it feels like we are all caught up in the mess with eyes that barely catch a glimpse of the blessing. *This is when we might cue up a different energizer-*

Do you want a revolution? I said, do you want a revolution?

We want reform. We want equity. We want mighty streams of justice. When do we want it? Now! We want more resources to do ministry. A vibrant program fit for young families. Renewed relevancy. When do we want it? Now!

We're tired of waiting, Jesus. Those forty days have turned into two-thousand years and it's about time.

We're itching to see the kingdom of God for real.

We've seen and touched the scars.

We've listened to the stories.

We've stayed in the city.

It's time now. If not now, when? If not You, who?

But there came Jesus, like the pastor sitting us down to create a covenant before the lock-in begins, wanting to make sure everyone's on the same page for our time together going forward.

Everyone belongs.

Hands to yourself.

When we play Sardines, the organ chambers are off limits for hiding.

We've got responsibility in this, too.

Jesus nixed the idea of a quick and triumphal end to this story.

God has some plans for this in-between time.

And we are key actors in this part.

There would be no returning home to tax booth or shipping pier or morning trips to the well. No relaxing into the assurance that the right person is now in place so we can just step back and enjoy the fruits of his labor from a safe distance. There

is work still to be done. "Why do you stand looking upwards towards heaven?" Just ask Mary, when the Holy Spirit is promised and the divine messengers appear, she'll tell you there's a whole new story about to be born—replete with the accompanying pure joys and sleepless nights.

And of course, this is a pre-Pentecost story, that is just what happened there as the apostles headed back to Jerusalem, right back into that upper room, devoting themselves to prayer, and about to be gobsmacked by the Holy Spirit.

It is darn good to have ants in our pants, friends. The world needs Jesus. *We* need Jesus. We need the urgency of those who wait because *we know, we trust*, in the one whom we are waiting for. Who, we are assured, will come back. It's that trust that turns our agitated attention from staring up at the sky, waiting for Jesus to come back (please!!)—towards the daily work of devoting ourselves as witnesses to him. I.e. The day job of the church.

As much as John Weicher loves energizers, he loves Jesus and Jesus' church more. Twenty years ago when we met on Montreat Summer Staff; me, learning the fine distinction between salmon and pink copy paper, and running errands for conference staff, and he setting up and tearing down and cleaning toilets all up and down those conference spaces, I kid you not that his devotion was evident even in how he lugged tables from one small group space to next. Even putting in place the carloads of pool noodles we'd schlepped down from Bonnie Brea for yet another recreation event. He's not a saint, there was plenty of grouching about Worship and Music bell tables; but even then, a good story could be told, and John keeps good stories *forever*. (I'll say again, if you don't yet know that about John, you don't even have to give him a full minute on this one.). After 3 years in seminary, 1 awesome spouse, 2 amazing kids, 2 ordained calls, 3 heads of staff (and one interim), countless confirmation classes, ski trips, coffee mornings, school plays, lacrosse games, Early worship services, and staff meetings, that devotion has not waned.

It is no small thing to love the church and to love the little things about it as well.

To keep at the daily lugging that is required for building up of good, lasting ministry.

To consistently put in the right place just the right person because you know her gifts and you want her to know them, too.

To show up with words of comfort, grace, challenge, and solidarity, *and* to know when words are not necessary; praying with and through the regular lives of people.

To love both the good-natured and the grumpy, often all in the same day, reminding yourself that each has an identity in Jesus, just like you.

Continuing to love, to create, to equip, and to get out of the way when you need to, even on the messiest of church days.

As one of John's favorites, the Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber wrote, "Never once did Jesus scan the room for the best example of holy living and send that person out to tell others about him. He always sent stumblers and sinners. I find that comforting." John is no saint. None of us are. But he loves you, church, and he will bring his *full* self for God's sake.

Where the apostles stood and where we stand today, stumblers and sinners all of us, is not all that different: still a bundle of confidence and nerves, still with a penchant to question, still with a call to trust the crazy Spirit and grab onto the power she blows thru us. Could they have imagined it, gathered together men and women, that there would be folks of all blessed identities still gathered together devoting ourselves to prayer; still loving Jesus and paying witness so many years later in this place with an odd fixation on blue devils?

They must have, because they got to work pretty quickly. But even if they didn't, we know that God did. God who is behind us, and in us, and in the eyes of our neighbors through all of this: Who knows the times and periods set.

Author of the world. Embodiment of grace. Breath of the Church.

God keeps us dancing, ants in our pants, itching both for what is to come and for what is now. God keeps putting together—pastor and church, so that we can agitate each other and agitate together. Never letting up the urgency of our shared call. God keeps renewing us in those blessed waters, in which we were all claimed and given power to witness, to serve, to go to the ends of the earth with this Good News—when in fact Jesus does descend just as he ascended we might finally rejoice,

"We're here! We're here! We're here, we're here, we're here! No ants!"