

Hespeler, 24 May, 2020 © Scott McAndless

Acts 1:3-14, Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35, 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11, John 17:1-11

If you were to ask people today how long it has been since everything shut down for this pandemic, what sort of answer might you expect? Someone might give you the literally correct answer, of course, and say that we have been locked down in Ontario now for 68 days. But really, most people wouldn't have that number at their fingertips and, short of somebody stopping and taking out a calendar and counting, I would not really expect that answer

What somebody might say is, "It's been umpteen days," or "a bajillion days" or "a zillion days." Everyone would understand that answer and I suspect that many people would see it as an answer that is about as accurate as 68 days. Umpteen days would probably better capture how many people feel about the extent of time than any specific number.

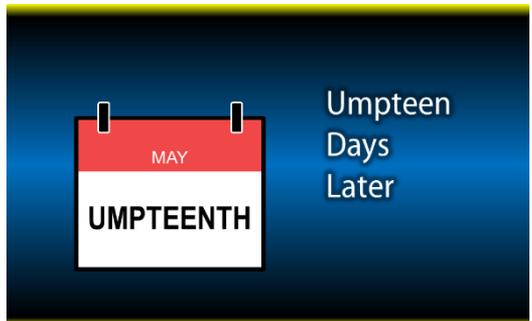
Words like that – a jillion, umpteen, a bazillion – are what are called fictitious numbers. They do not refer to specific quantities or amounts but are rather a way of expressing a large, perhaps overwhelming amount. In that sense, it is pretty accurate to say that we've been under lockdown for umpteen days.

Those are English fictitious numbers, of course, but many other languages have their own ways of expressing the same kinds of ideas. Some use actual numbers as fictitious numbers. In Latin, for example, the word *sescenti* literally meant 600, but it was commonly used to mean *a lot*.

Ancient Near Eastern languages also had a number that they used in the same way; that number was forty. That is the reason why the story of "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" has forty thieves in it. I hope this is not a shock to you, but nobody actually counted the thieves in that story, they didn't need to, they just knew there were a lot of them so they said forty.

That is probably also why the number forty comes up a lot in the Bible – 40 days of rain during Noah's flood, 40 years in the wilderness for the children of Israel, 40 days of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness by the devil – the people in that culture understood whenever they heard that number 40, that the number didn't need to be precise. It just meant a long time.

With all of that in mind, I've always wondered how we are supposed to read the beginning of the book of Acts when it says, "**After 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.” Is Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, referring to a very specific period of time when he says forty days or is he basically saying that Jesus was with them for umpteen days?

Ah, but you might say that hanging around with Jesus following the resurrection is not at all like living through a pandemic. That is a joyful thing, not something that’s going to seem like it’s lasting forever, is it? Why would it seem like it was umpteen days long? But, you see, it is not just negative events that can seem interminable. Sometimes it feels that way when you are anticipating something and that seems to be the case here.

We’re told that, during those umpteen days, Jesus was incessantly speaking to them about “the kingdom of God.” That was indeed one of Jesus’ favourite topics of conversation and an exciting idea, but maybe – just maybe – the disciples were feeling as if they had listened to Jesus’ talk about the kingdom long enough and it was time for them to see some action.

In fact, that is exactly what they say: **“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”** In other words, “Enough with the talk! We’ve heard all of the parables and the sayings. We remember the time when you said **‘Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’** It’s time for less talk and more showing: show us the kingdom now!”

And I’m going to be completely honest here. I am kind of with the disciples on this one. And that is especially true right now after umpteen days in lockdown. Now, I will admit that I probably don’t mean it in exactly the same way that the disciples meant it. It seems, from what they said, that they had a very particular idea of what the kingdom of God looked like and that they were assuming that it had to include the restoration of Judean sovereignty over what had once been the Kingdom of Judea. It meant, in other words, kicking the Romans out. But, if that is what they were expecting, they really weren’t listening all that closely the parables of Jesus. The kingdom that he announced did not require a particular political resolution.

But even if I don’t see the kingdom of God in exactly the same terms that they were imagining, I’ve got to say that I am feeling very impatient for the kingdom of God that I understand Jesus was talking about. Why can’t we see it now?

Jesus spoke of a kingdom where “the first would be last and the last would be first,” where, in other words, the ordinary social and economic order would be completely disrupted and overturned and where the poorest and the weakest came out on top. He spoke of a kingdom where the outcasts were included and the neglected and forgotten were given a place at the table and where God demanded justice for all. These are the kinds of themes that come out consistently in everything that Jesus said about the kingdom

of God. And I have long felt as if the world has been in great need of some of that. But, I will confess, since all of this crisis began umpteen days ago, I, like the disciples, have been feeling all the more impatient for the kingdom to be established.

I don't know about you, but for me this particular crisis has made me think a whole lot about who is first and who is last. And the people we used to think of as being first, the millionaires and the celebrities for example, it's been amazing to see how irrelevant they have become – how little they seem to deserve to command vast amounts of wealth while the people who were near the bottom of society, the lowly people who laboured away in the service industry and in the supply chain and who produced and connected us to our food supplies, how very important they have become. I've got to say that it has made me think that it is well past time for the first to become last and the last to become first.

The long-term care crisis in Canada in particular has really pointed out many of the shortcomings of our ways of operating. Do you realize that, over the past several weeks, long-term care facilities across this country have seen infection rates from covid-19 that are roughly the same whether those facilities are government-run, nonprofit or for-profit. But here is the huge difference between those different types of facilities. Once an infection has made its way into a long-term care facility, residents are four times more likely to die if they live in a for-profit facility.

It is not all that hard to see why this has happened. For-profit facilities receive the same amount of funding as other facilities but they need to generate profits to pay dividends to their investors. Because of this, they need to save money someplace and generally do that by paying as little as possible to their workers and saving as much as possible on equipment. The result is that these facilities are understaffed and staff are under equipped. That calculation – placing profits over people – has proved to be especially dangerous and deadly in the age of covid-19.

This pandemic has been a tragedy in so many ways but it would be a double tragedy if we failed to learn anything from it. What I find myself yearning for us to learn is some of the basics of the kingdom of God that Jesus preached. So I stand with the disciples in their demand: **“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”** But I guess that I, like them, would be wise to listen closely to Jesus' answer.

“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.” Of course, that's not really the answer I would like to hear. I, like you, am kind of tired of waiting around for somebody else to tell me that it's time to exit the present state of emergency. But I think we've all come to appreciate the wisdom of listening when it comes to such important matters.

What Jesus is saying here is that the times are not merely in the hands of chief medical officers of health or politicians but ultimately in the hands of God and that is a good place for them to be. As hard as that may be to hear, we are going to have to trust in God for the establishment of the kingdom of God and the justice that comes with it. If we were to seek to bring it about on our own it could easily devolve into violence or worse injustice as those who have attempted to set up utopian societies in the past have often discovered.

But just because it is not up to us to create the kingdom of God whole cloth, that doesn't mean that we don't have a part to play in its establishment on earth. Jesus goes on from there to say, **“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.”** We do indeed have a part to play, and that part is to be witnesses to Jesus. And that means that we must bear witness to everything about Jesus – to his birth, his life, his death and resurrection and what that has meant to us for new hope and healing and salvation.

It also means bearing witness to his teaching including all of the teaching about the kingdom of God. What might such witness look like in our present situation? It might mean that we are to point out what we see going on in our society and the need for change and the reasons why the first might need to be last and the last first right now. Bearing witness to Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God might be extremely unpopular at times like this, but Jesus calls on us to do it anyway.

But just in case that all seems a little bit overwhelming, don't worry that is not the entirety of Jesus' message because, before he says, **“you will be my witnesses”** he gives this promise, **“you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.”** My friends, do not be afraid because not only has Jesus given to you a message that can challenge and change this world by turning it upside down, Jesus has also given to you the power you will need to bear that witness even when things are hard and no one wants to hear it. That power is made available to you in God's Holy Spirit.

Next week is Pentecost Sunday and on Pentecost we will turn our minds to the exploration of the power of God's Spirit and how it gives us what we need to be those witnesses in the world. But know for now that that power is real and it is transformative. It is the power that was at work in creating this world and it is available to us. It is the power that brought the church into existence and it is available to us. It is the power of God to transform the world and it is available to us.

I can't promise to you that the kingdom of God is about to be established because such timing is in God's hands. But you have a part to play and you can be bold to speak, to act and to challenge – maybe especially at such times as these.