

## *Living on a "Need to Know" Basis*

Acts 1:1-11 (NRSV)

Advances in science and technology are helping us know more and more about ourselves...for better or worse!

23andMe<sup>1</sup> is a personal genomics and biotechnology company that is making DNA information accessible to anyone, anywhere. Have you heard of it? Has anyone here done the 23andMe genetic testing?

Damon and I did it. It's pretty incredible. We're still going through all of our results, which is time-consuming, but the actual test is easy.

Basically – once you purchase the kit, they send it to you and you spit into a tube and mail it off and from your saliva, you receive information about your ancestry and your genetics, including information about your health. 23andMe makes you sign several waivers ensuring that you understand that receiving information about your DNA related to your health and ancestry can be surprising or disturbing and

that once you know something, you can't "unknow" it.

So, what do Damon and I know now that we didn't know before?

You'll be pleased to know that generally, we have pretty good genetics on our side, however Damon's results revealed that he is at a higher risk (just slightly...5-7%) for developing late-set Alzheimer's. And I found out that I have two DNA indicators (the highest possible) for having macular degeneration, aka, losing my sight.

Now does this mean Damon will lose his mind and I'll go blind? No, it just means that our genetics aren't helping us out in this regard. 23andMe makes it clear: these results are not a predictor or a diagnosis...they are just a potential indicator.

Now, many folks would prefer to NOT know what illnesses might befall them later in life, and I totally get that. They'd rather live on a "need to know basis" not a

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[www.23andMe.com](http://www.23andMe.com)

“I’d like to know all possibilities in advance basis.” And really, should we be trusting our fate to our spit or to the Spirit of God?

Science is all about finding out all we can know. And faith, I think, is about living on a “need to know” basis. And today’s text speaks to this in a very specific way.

The book of Acts is Luke’s sequel to his gospel. His first book is about the acts of Jesus, and this sequel is about acts of the apostles, and in chapter 1, Luke pivots us from Christ to the church. The story of the Ascension of Jesus is a hinge between the book about Christ’s life and the book about the church’s life. The Ascension even reorients time, as any seemingly big loss does, because it marks the last physical appearance of Jesus on earth. And without Jesus by their side, the disciples fear they will no longer be “in the know” about things. In fact, how will they know anything about God without Jesus there?

This is what makes the Ascension moment so significant. It’s a symbolic moment for all of us, I think, because we can relate to the disciples’ realization that they are about to be on their own, or so they think.

Jesus’ ascension is his final act, his curtain call, if you will. But he’s not just on stage for one last bow, seeking the applause of his captive audience; he’s bowing to them as a gesture of “passing the baton” so to speak; he’s not saying the show is over, he’s saying the show must go on, and the audience is now the cast. The spectators are now the actors.

And before this big hand-off takes place, the disciples ask Jesus one final question. Literally, this question is the last thing off of their lips before Jesus leaves them. They don’t use this moment to weep and cry and say their final goodbyes, rather they ask, “*Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*”

In other words, they are asking a question that we all ask: “*Lord, when will you set things right? When will the oppression by the Romans end? When will the suffering and the troubles of the world be over? When will hunger be abolished? When will war cease? When will suffering and pain be no more? When will justice be realized? Lord, when?*”<sup>2</sup> They are really echoing the Psalmist’s plea, “*How long, O*

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Michael Curry, “Can I Get a Witness? Faith & Global Hunger Part 4,” *Day 1* (July 4, 2010), accessed on May 13,

2018 at <http://day1.org/2038-can-i-get-a-witness-faith-global-hunger-part-4>.

*Lord?*” that is repeated oft throughout Israel’s history.

And Jesus essentially shuts down any and all of their questions about timing by replying, *“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set,”* (v7).

On Mother’s Day, we might rephrase Jesus’ words to answer their question, *“You don’t need to know... (why?)... because I said so.”* If moms get to say and know some things without explanation, I guess God can too!

Really, if you think about it, our parents rarely tell us everything as kids; rather, they only tell us things on a “need to know” basis. For one thing, they know we can’t comprehend the same depth of detail and level of information as adults. But also, they want us just to be focused on the task at hand or else it will never get done. Take for example, the bedtime routine. Many parents don’t just say, “time for bed and grab their kid away from whatever they’re doing and put them in bed.” They break the news to them that it’s bed time in small pieces...just telling them what they need to know in that moment:

*“Honey, just one more show on the i-pad...then we’ll start getting ready for bed...:”*

Then comes the warning... *“five more minutes...”*

Then come the step-by-step instructions, each one given after the previous one is completed:

*Time to turn off the i-pad  
Get into your pajamas  
Brush your teeth  
Choose 2 books (just 2!)  
Get in bed  
Read 1 book together  
Read another book  
Turn on nightlight, turn off lights  
Say a prayer  
Kiss goodnight  
Time for bed...*

*(and there’s probably a plea for a glass of milk in there somewhere...or for a drink of water...or for another book...or to ask a pressing question...)*

Parents give one instruction at a time, sometimes two, so that a child can succeed at following that instruction. As kids grow, we get more instructions at once because we can handle more.

I don’t think it works exactly the same way as we grow in our faith, but there are parallels. I do think that as new Christians, we take in just what we need to take in as we learn who Jesus is, and then we begin to ask more questions as our

prayer life deepens, as we learn more in Bible Study, as we worship, etc. But probably the biggest myth in Christian faith is that if we pray hard enough and long enough, God will give us “the answer.”

Well, what “answer?” God reveals things to us as we pray and struggle and live and grow in faith, but in my experience, it’s not usually answers to my specific questions. It’s more guidance or a gut feeling on what the right next step to take is – and then God gives me courage to take that step. And gradually those steps will lead to an answer that I only see or understand in retrospect. And by the time I can see and understand the answer, usually I’m not even asking that question anymore...somehow I’ve arrived into the answer.

Think about a GPS system. When you program a GPS, you tell it your starting point, and you tell it where you want to go. Then you are given directions as you need them. If you're taking a journey of 100 miles, the navigational system doesn't spout out all of the directions to you in the first five minutes. It knows you're on a “need to know” basis. It gives you the directions as you need them, or

perhaps just a bit ahead of time so you can be prepared for the turn or the junction coming up.<sup>3</sup>

The point where the GPS analogy breaks down is that at least with a GPS you have plugged in where you are going...you have a destination even if you don’t know the way you’ll get there. Often with faith, we don’t even know our destination. And that’s because we think that our destination is some specific place, or job, or life stage, or salary, or sense of security, etc. But what if our sole destination, in all of our life, is God? As Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber reminds us, “*God is both our origin and our destination.*”

And yet, the fact that God is our origin and our destination, doesn’t keep us from worrying in the meantime, does it? It’s human nature. To worry. To wonder. You could say that one of the hardest parts of life is all of the “not knowing”...the fact that our future holds so many unknowns.

Think of something right now that you wish you knew the answer to...maybe that you’ve been praying to know the answer to...

Maybe it’s a diagnosis, for you or a loved one...you just want to

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<sup>3</sup> Marie T. Russell, “Life Is Like A GPS: You're On A Need-To-Know Basis,” *Innerself* (accessed on May 13, 2018 at

<https://innerself.com/content/personal/attitudes-transformed/fear-and-worry/6974-need-to-know-basis.html>).

know what it is, so the doctors can treat it. Waiting and not knowing is the hardest part...you'd even take a tough diagnosis over not knowing.

Maybe it's about a job...you've interviewed several different places and you think they've gone well, but you just keep waiting, and with every rejection that comes you start to doubt that one day you will get an offer. You go from wondering and not knowing about *when* you'll be employed again and spiral down to asking if you'll *ever* be employed again.

Maybe the "not knowing" you are struggling with is not even about your life, it's about your child's life or your grandchild's life or your partner's life...because you worry for them...about whether they'll go to school or get a job...about whether they'll find happiness or fall in love or have children or stay healthy or stay in church, keep the faith, etc.

So many of our questions are rooted in fears about the future, aren't they? And many times they point to things outside of ourselves, instead of focusing on the spiritual growth we need to do internally to release those fears and to trust God. We want quick

answers that other people can answer for us, not tough growth that only we can endure ourselves. Even though we know we're supposed to have faith and trust God, it's hard to live "on a need to know" basis when it comes to our lives...because it's *our life!*

But what Jesus says in Acts is that faith requires us to live on a "need to know basis."

The phrase "need to know" basis is a military/government phrase that usually deals with high security/clearance operations. In these situations, if you tell people something on a "need to know" basis, you only tell them the facts they need to know at the time they need to know them, and nothing more. This is so there aren't security leaks or breaches. The classic example that is often used is The Battle of Normandy in 1944. Though thousands of military personnel were involved in planning the invasion, only a small number of them knew the entire scope of the operation; the rest were only informed of data needed to complete a small part of the plan.<sup>4</sup> Yet without their small part, they plan would've failed.

Nowadays, we use the terminology "need to know basis" for all kinds

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· Information accessed on May 13, 2018 at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Need\\_to\\_know](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Need_to_know).

of things, not just secret, covert operations. But the original principle of “need to know” says that having the “clearance” for information is only half of the issue. The other half is actually having the *need* to know. Meaning, not do you have permission to know this, but even if you have permission, do you *need to know* this to do your job or can you do your job effectively without knowing?

This is a good question for us to ask when we reflect on the disciples’ question in today’s text as if it were our own. Because I don’t think that Jesus is just saying “*you don’t get to know the time because you are not allowed to know the time because I said so...*” In other words, maybe not telling the disciples when the kingdom of God is coming is not about them not being worthy to know or allowed to know...or not having “clearance” (so to speak) to know. But maybe it’s about the fact that they don’t need to know the answer to that question to do their job, and in fact, if they did know the answer, it would hinder their ability to do their job.

And what is their job? Well, Jesus tells them flat out: “*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,*” (v8).

They are to be witnesses to the life and message of Jesus to the world. That is their job. Their sole pre-occupation, or really occupation. If they knew when the kingdom would be restored, what motivation would they have to bring about restoration themselves? They would just keep waiting for Jesus to show up again in physical form, instead of realizing that the power of Jesus is now the power of Christ in the Holy Spirit which is living *in and through them*. As Paul would later describe it – they are now the Body of Christ!

And here is the key that truly unlocks the power of this text: Not only do the disciples *not* need to know the timing about when God will restore the kingdom, Jesus can’t give them the answer to that question because it depends on them! They are part of the answer to the very question they are asking, but they don’t realize it. They are the ones who will bring about the restoration of God’s kingdom on earth...by being witnesses of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. It’s not just up to Jesus...which is what Jesus is politely trying to tell them one last time. There’s a reason he called them to be disciples!

This is really key: God reveals something major here in how Jesus answers their question. Jesus not only tells them that they don't need to know the time that God will restore the kingdom, he also tells them that *they* are the ones who will restore it (not some future version of himself). This is why Luke places the two men in white robes there with the disciples after Jesus ascends...because as the disciples stand with their mouths gaping open, they ask the question, "*Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?*" (v. 11) This question is not-so-subtle in reminding them of the words Jesus just said to them. They are not to look to heaven and wait on God to come and restore the world, they are to get busy restoring the world themselves. The power of God is within them, not just above them.

Sometimes we so desperately want to know how our lives will unfold and what is coming next that we are distracted from answering the real call of Christ: to let the Holy Spirit enable us to be witnesses to the ends of the earth of Jesus' message.

What if faith is less about "knowing" and more about

"doing?" Jesus says we don't need to know all the answers but we do need to know the strength of Christ in us...so that we are empowered to act on his behalf to the world!

If we are focused too much on our own questions, we miss the tangible needs right in front of us that we can answer by our words and deeds. Not all things are mysteries. We can feed those who are hungry; we can clothe those who are naked; we can shelter those who are without a home; we can pray with or for those who are depressed or destitute; we can keep coming to church to discover the depths of God's love for our own lives; we can take actions that reduce violence, spread tolerance, and embody forgiveness. *And when we do those things - we are actually part of the answer to the disciples' question of when they kingdom would be restored!*

South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu paraphrased the words of St. Augustine on the mission and work of the church when he said, "*By himself, God won't; by ourselves, we can't; but together with God, we can!*"<sup>5</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Curry, *ibid.*