

God comes and goes (Acts 1:1-11)

This seems to be par for the course.

by [Teri McDowell Ott](#)

May 28, 2019

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

As a college chaplain, I have a great view of our commencement ceremony. I pray at the beginning and bless the graduates at the end and in between just sit on stage observing the sea of humanity.

It's fascinating. Who needs social media with a view like this? Zealous mothers on cell phones knocking down the professional photographer to get their own photo, families holding up banners of congratulation and styrofoam-mounted photos of their graduate's face, the unfortunate graduate in the front row who clearly pulled an all-nighter.

Graduation is such a big moment. Crossing that stage to accept your diploma is like crossing a threshold. You step across it and step out into your future; you step out on your own for what is perhaps the very first time.

At the baccalaureate service the day before, we tell our graduates that as they go, they go with God. Which is true. But if we were being totally honest we would tell them that as they move into their future and move through their life, God will come and God will go.

In Acts 1 we witness the disciples recalibrating as God comes and goes. First Jesus was there. Then he was dead. Then he appeared among them. Now he is lifted up on a cloud and taken out of sight.

As Jesus floats away, two men in white robes appear to chastise the disciples: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up to heaven?” It’s as if they shouldn’t be surprised by what has just taken place. This coming and going, it seems, is par for the course with God. “Jesus, who has been taken from you,” the two men say, “will come in the same way as you saw him go.”

There are times when God is quite real to us, a presence we can feel and know and commune with intimately. Other times God is gone, absent, leaving us longing for what we knew and felt before. There are seasons to the life of faith, reflected by the church calendar—seasons of expectation and waiting, of turning and returning, of new birth and resurrection glory, of epiphany, of ordinary time when nothing special is happening and we are left to look for God among the routine and mundane.

Christian Wiman writes that “the very act of attention troubles the tyranny of the ordinary.” For Wiman, God is not dormant. God is not gone. Instead, God is everywhere—in every detail and in every person. It’s up to us, then, to pay attention, to lean into life, to notice life’s divine “moreness” wherever it might be found.

“My work is loving the world,” writes Mary Oliver. “Which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.”