

Sermon for FPC Gardena – Sunday May 9, 2010

John 14:23-29

Throughout his time with them, Jesus did all that he could to prepare his disciples for what was to come. He tried to help them understand that he would be put to death, but that after three days he would rise from the dead. And he wanted them to know that even after his ascension into heaven that he would still be present with them in a different form. Through stories and experiences, he taught them by example what their responsibilities would be when he was gone. This was an enormous amount of information for the disciples to take in, and it would have been extremely challenging for them to grasp the mysterious order of events that Jesus was describing to them.

Today's passage takes place in the midst of Holy Week, on Maundy Thursday, following the foot washing and before Jesus' betrayal and arrest. In the conversation after the meal, Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?"

Listen, now, for God's word for you.

John 14:23-29

Jesus offered them this promise in hopes that they could take comfort from it and find hope in it as they faced his death in the hours ahead. He wanted them to know that they had nothing to fear and that they would not be abandoned. Jesus' message here is one of utter love and comfort for the people he cared about so deeply, and who would be the ones to teach and assure others about Jesus' ongoing presence with them. This message is also important for us as we prepare to observe Pentecost.

When people receive the news that someone we love is going away—whether they are relocating to another city or country, or whether they are moving from this life into new life, it can make for a very difficult period of adjustment. Studies have identified various stages of grief, which include denial, anger, bargaining, and deep sadness. It can take people a long time to arrive at some semblance of acceptance.

Such human change and loss is inevitable, and a measure of resistance is very natural. Yet what the disciples were facing was something much larger—and far less comprehensible. For how were the disciples supposed to comprehend the prophetic truths being offered? I once heard grief defined as the 'loss of a dream'. Can you imagine the men and women who had left homes, families, jobs, and everything familiar to follow and to serve Jesus?

Their new style of living would have been incredibly challenging, yet very exciting and fulfilling, and filled with hope. To imagine this all coming to an end would have been a source of deep grief as well as great confusion.

This is why Jesus' words of preparation speak so comfortingly of love and peace and hope and faith. The disciples would surely need to draw upon all such reassurances as they navigated the varied events that would follow in the hours, days, weeks, and months following Jesus' arrest later that night.

In order to prepare his disciples for the coming of the Holy Spirit following his ascension, Jesus told them that, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." What Jesus was saying here was that God and Christ would be present with them in the form of the Holy Spirit.

This promise is for us as well—at our invitation, the Living Christ dwells in our hearts and souls, providing us with healing and comfort, wisdom and guidance, and all manner of faith. We are never without our God.

Jesus further clarifies this in his next statement, "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you."

In the midst of such a bewildering string of events, it must have been reassuring to hear this part of Jesus' promise—an assurance of teaching and of being reminded of all his teachings.

The term “Advocate” is an interesting one. In the climate of fear and violence that was swirling through Jerusalem in that time, particularly as the events of Thursday night and Friday unfolded, the idea of an Advocate--one who would help, who would take their part, would have been very appealing.

Many other names for the Holy Spirit appear in the scriptures, each one adding to our understanding and building our faith. The Holy Spirit has been a part of God's presence and God's work from the very beginning. That same Spirit would continue to be at work in and through the disciples.

In the very first lines of Genesis, we read that, “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” Many translations use the word ‘spirit’ rather than wind.

The Prophet Isaiah spoke of the Holy Spirit in his foretelling of Jesus' birth.

We read these words during each Advent season,

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“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.” The Spirit of creation would be present in the incarnation.

We may recall that it was **“by the power of the Holy Spirit”** that Jesus was conceived, and that at his baptism, **“a spirit like a dove”** descended upon him. And then, as his earthly life was coming to a close, Jesus promised his disciples that even though he would not be physically present with them in the future, he would be present in the form of the Spirit—a Spirit that was familiar to them and which would be as close as their own breath.

Today’s words from the book of John are among the most gentle, caring words that Jesus spoke, **“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”** Jesus does not want to leave his loved ones, but he knows that he must. Yet he is most concerned about *their* well-being, the confusion and the grief that he knows they will experience, the feelings of abandonment which they will probably confront. And so he gives them a blessing of peace.

As with the promise of the Holy Spirit, Jesus' blessing of peace is for each of us as well. It is a beautiful and healing gift, which we can turn to, again and again, in times of grief or change, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." Surely these loving words can provide rest for our souls and hope in the face of lost dreams.

As the disciples faced Jesus' death, and then his ascension into heaven, they would need to make a transition in the understanding of their faith. As Jews, they had understood the presence of God, and worshiped God without seeing that presence. But then came the Messiah, Jesus, and they grew accustomed to having God visibly and tangibly in their midst. Now, they would need to return to communicating with, relying on, and worshiping a less visible presence—the Holy Spirit. They would need to rely on images of God, such as 'Advocate' and other biblical illustrations, in order to teach others about God, Christ, and Spirit.

One biblical image of the Holy Spirit is 'Counselor', reminding us that we are not alone, that we have a trusted confidant and advisor to help direct our paths.

Other attributes of the Spirit include wisdom, power, knowledge, truth, grace, and glory. Paul describes ‘the fruits of the Spirit’ as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” With the Holy Spirit dwelling in them, Christ’s disciples would develop these attributes and minister to others in these ways. The Spirit which God would send to Christ’s followers would not only bring comfort and assurance to them, but would assist them in spreading the gospel message.

As Jesus prepared to meet his death, he put his time and energy into preparing his disciples for the changes, the hurts, and the tasks that would lie ahead. He promised them the gift of the Holy Spirit, who would dwell within them forevermore. In doing so, he offered them comfort and peace, he gave them wisdom and guidance for their ministries, and he opened a window to new understandings of God’s presence through images for the Spirit.

And, Christ offers all of these gifts to us as well....

When we are feeling sad or lonely or afraid, we have Christ’s peace dwelling in our hearts, and the spirit of the Risen Christ making a home within us.

When we are feeling overwhelmed by the tasks of mission and ministry to which we are called, we have the Advocate to turn to for guidance and for strength.

And the Advocate will provide us with tools of wisdom, knowledge, grace, and truth to help us do the work of the gospel.

When we are feeling adrift, confused, unsure of our callings in the midst of life's changing circumstances, we can turn to the variety of images of the Holy Spirit which can be found throughout the scriptures. In these, we can find evidence of God's strength, gentleness, creativity, grace, love, and steadfast presence in the world and in the lives of human beings.

Most of all, as we consider today's passage, and Christ's promise to his disciples, let us be aware of the motive behind his words. Jesus loves his disciples—each and every one of us. He wants to dwell within our hearts, to comfort and guide us, and to be our Teacher and Advocate and Counselor throughout our lives. Jesus promise is one of constancy—we will never be abandoned by God, nor will we ever be set adrift from God's love.

In the face of changes and challenges and all manner of chaos, we are blessed by the truths spoken so eloquently by the Apostle Paul in his Letter to the Romans as he describes the Holy Spirit, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” Then Paul concludes, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Our God, the Risen Christ, the Holy Spirit will never abandon us. We need not let our hearts be troubled, nor should we ever be afraid, for we have been gifted with the peace of Christ to love and sustain us forevermore. Amen.

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Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.