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Seventh virtual worship in the time of Covid-19

### **The Advocate**

I Peter 3:13-22  
John 14:15-21

This week a man asked me a four word question that addresses one of the deepest of mysteries. He said, "So...the Holy Spirit?" I had a ready answer, for I once had the same question. I said, "The Holy Spirit is God at work here and now." The Holy Spirit is not a ghost. (Though the classic version of the Apostles' Creed says we believe in the "Holy Ghost" the word ghost there means an invisible spirit, not the ghost of a dead human, or any other being.) The Holy Spirit is not separate from Jesus and God; the three are expressions of, faces of, encounters with the One Holy God. After my explanation he said, "Well, after all that's going on it's been kind of hard for me to believe God hasn't left me alone."

I hope he listens to this sermon. As often happens, in the moment with him I was not quick enough on the uptick to remember that today I preach about the Holy Spirit. In the Gospel of John Jesus tells his disciples, "I will pray to the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the spirit of truth..." The word our New Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates as Counselor means advocate, comforter, adviser, defender. This Holy Spirit of truth is God comforting and guiding us. This Spirit is with us now, and will stay with us forever, Jesus promises.

Jesus adds, "I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you." He appears to refer to two comings, to his resurrection, his second coming: and to his gift of himself in the person of the Holy Spirit, to his presence with us even after he bodily leaves this life. He does not leave us desolate, in lonesome despair, alone. Christian existentialist Soren Kierkegaard considered despair the purest of all sins, for we can enter into true despair only when we have lost our faith in God. Jesus promised to remain with us forever. For as long as we believe him we cannot despair. For when we believe in him we must also believe his promise to remain with us in spirit.

Covid-19 has hit several classes of humanity harder than others. Worst hit of all are those who suffer and die from having caught it. It has also compressed families with children still at home into more time and less space than they normally have together, creating angst under many roofs. One other class presents us with an opportunity for ministry. I refer to those who live alone, especially the older ones. As the deacons and I have connected with these folks we occasionally hear honest, sad accounts of their mental, emotional and spiritual states. Common statements: "I'm bored." "I'm thinking too much—I can't read/watch TV/write cards all day every day." "When do you think this will end?" "When we open church again I'm going and I don't care what they say."

Church, let us not wait for however and whenever we open our doors. Let us intensify our efforts to connect with these folks. Let us call or visit them. Drop off a

pint of Rocky Road, ring their doorbells and hide in the bushes. Let them wonder for a minute, then step out and have a conversation from six feet apart. I know of a crew at Central Presbyterian that has conducted a taped interview with one of our older members about her memories of her girlhood during the Depression and World War II. They may do more of these. Maybe we could write cards and send them to the generation that has kept Hallmark in business all these years.

Jesus points out that whoever “has my commandments and keeps them,” **loves**. Let us love one another in these strange and threatening days. Let us let the power of the Holy Spirit, God with us here and now, lift us out of despair.

The author of I Peter outlines another way for us to respond to suffering. He addresses specifically those who “suffer for righteousness.” He means Christians persecuted for their faith. But his prescription applies to all who suffer, for whatever reason. He writes, “Always be prepared to make a defense to any who call you to account for the hope you have.” Translation: “Always be prepared to confess your faith when people question you about it.” Here are two examples of how this can look.

When the gentleman said, “So...the Holy Spirit?” and concluded with “all that’s going on” and how he felt alone, I was quick enough to witness to my faith. I said something like, “I do still believe in God. Faith is a gift and I am thankful I have been given it.” I hope this encouraged him at least in some small way. Every major trauma causes large numbers of people to question God, whether God’s goodness or

whether there *is* a God. Now is the best of all times to speak of our faith. But we must, as the author of I Peter points out, do so with gentleness and reverence. Abrasive, aggressive witnesses to God function more like witnesses for the prosecution than for the defense. Calmly, gently and forthrightly speak of how your faith in God has helped you these days and you can make an impact on others.

Our second example of how to witness to our faith springs from the fact that we have never had a better opportunity to invite people to church. “Going” to church these days means going to YouTube or Facebook. Inviting people to church now is less awkward, less fearsome. Many people used to attend church but no longer do. They might want to, but bitter memories of mistreatment by Christians or guilt at not having gone for so long may keep them away. Others have never gone to church and have no idea what to expect. Both groups of people experience no roadblocks when checking in on friends or watching cat videos on social media. Now that our services are on social media, what stands between them and viewing our worship services is one thing, and one thing only: our own reluctance to witness to our faith.

I must see twenty pictures a week of plates of food on Facebook. It used to be these photos were taken in restaurants; now they feature home cooking. But the point is we are happy to witness to a well-run business or to our own efforts. Why not witness to the One who gives us hope and comfort even during lock down? Why not witness to the One who guides us to those needing our love? Why not witness to the One who pleads our case before God Almighty? You will know better than I how to

approach specific people in your life. I can only urge that you do it.

God has not left us alone. God moves within and between us this very moment. The Spirit of God has given us the gift of faith. The Spirit of God has brought us together in the Church. The Spirit of God embraces the lonely in warmth and love.