

## **Receiving and Giving the Spirit**

Exodus 13:17-22

John 14:25-31

The passage we just read often appears in funeral services. In fact, funerals employ most all of the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John. It opens with Jesus' speech about God's house with many rooms. He promises to go there and prepare places for his followers. He adds his famous statement, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." God's house equals heaven. Jesus tells us we get there by following him.

Thomas asks Jesus to show them "the Father", God. Jesus gives a poetic, winding answer that essentially states, "I am God." He calls upon all to believe in the Father and in him, for "I am in the Father and the Father is in me." Then, after a couple of admonitions to obey the commandments, Jesus starts talking about the Holy Spirit. He promises to send us a "Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth..." He says this Spirit will dwell in us. It will teach us. It will heal us. It will comfort us. It will guide us. The Holy Spirit—God at work here and now—is God's gift to us. Receive it. Give it.

In our verses Jesus continues his descriptions of the Spirit. He says, "The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name..." The Greek word John uses for "Counselor" is "Paraclete", which means "helper" or "intercessor". In

ancient Greek trials, a Paraclete would speak for the accused. In well-to-do Greek households, a Paraclete would serve as a nanny. At Greek funerals, a Paraclete—often hired for the purpose—would comfort the grieving. The word paraclete refers to a complex, rich range of things. No doubt John, the most poetic and mystical of the Gospel writers, chose it for this very reason. Jesus is promising to send us a defense attorney/nanny/comforter. In the year 2020, somehow this does not seem such a strange combination.

Because the next topic in Jesus' speech is peace. He promises to give us perfect, everlasting peace. That peace can blanket us no matter how deep nor how long-lasting our anxieties may be. It can bridge us over the delay as we wait for Christ's return. It can bolster our faith. Our church and financial secretary, Sarah Kelsheimer, has a friend who survived the COVID-19 virus. For a few days he grew steadily sicker, starting with a low-grade fever, then progressing to a cough and finally the dreaded loss of taste and smell. He tested positively for the virus. He quarantined at home, his family staying in the other end of their house. One night he stepped outside to look at the stars. Suddenly, everything turned purple. He thought, "I better get back inside. Nobody knows where I am." He struggled inside—and dropped to his knees. He prayed that God either take him, or help him to recover, but whichever it were, that it happen quickly.

Immediately an indescribable sense of peace washed over him. Eventually normal colors returned to his vision. And he felt able to accept whatever God had in

store for him. Sarah describes him as “already a man of faith.” He attends a church near where they live. But through this experience of the Holy Spirit he now has a stronger bond with Christ; not because he has survived the virus, but because he met God. Jesus sent the Spirit. The man knew peace. He received the gift. And while I recognize that an anecdote like this proves nothing, and that some hearing it may scoff at its veracity, I share it as the testimony of one man. Take it or leave it. But understand that taking it means accepting the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Whether or not each of us has experienced the presence of God, even if less dramatically, I submit that one of us has in fact been given the gift of the Holy Spirit. How might we use it? How might we give it? When Moses heard God telling him to lead the Children of Israel out of Egypt, he did not want the job. He had murdered an Egyptian and fled for his life. He did not consider himself a leader. He did not want the responsibility. But after experiencing the presence of God in the burning bush that was not consumed by fire, Moses accepted the “gift” of his calling. He returned to Egypt, locked horns not only with Pharaoh but also with the elders of his own people, and ultimately won their freedom. The passage we read from Exodus recounts the precise moment the children of Israel began their long walk to the Promised Land.

Have you ever felt imprisoned? Have you ever *been* imprisoned? What would it be like if the wall that separates North from South Korea were suddenly demolished? What would the North Koreans do? Would they immediately drop everything and run across to the South and freedom? Maybe they would and maybe they would not.

After lifetimes of propaganda and brutality is it not likely that most of them would wait, would prefer not to test a reality that seemed too good to be true, would not want to catch the bullets if it turned out to be a set up? The promise of peace and prosperity might not overbalance the fear of the unknown, the questions about whether all those promised blessings were true. In the same way, the children of Israel hesitated to leave Egypt. Soon they would clamor to return. In the same way many of us hesitate to trust the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the same way some, having previously trusted in the promises of God—including the gift of the Holy Spirit—return to doubt after experiencing trials, whether trials of faith or in life.

But Moses prevailed. Taking the bones of their revered ancestor Joseph with them, the people followed Moses into the wilderness. We, too, must enter the wilderness. Having accepted the gift of the Holy Spirit, we must walk out into those places and meet those people most in need of an experience of the presence of God. We have knowledge, for as Jesus said, “(The Spirit) will teach you all things.” Among the most critical pieces of knowledge we have is of that peace of Christ that passes understanding. Jesus has promised to send us a defense attorney/nanny/comforter. Every person out there needs to experience the peace of Christ through some combination of his advocacy in these, and other roles.

There are those accused of misbehaving in marriages, in professional lives, in whatever arena, who need to know that peace of Christ that comes from experiencing his defense of them. Christ serves as the advocate for sinners before a holy God.

Christ serves as an advocate for those seeking to heal broken relationships. Christ serves as an advocate for those seeking to speak truth to power. He performs these roles in the person of the Holy Spirit, God at work here and now. If you need defending—and we all do, including every person we encounter in every place—receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and you will know peace.

And give that gift. A member of this church came into my office last week and said he knew I was trying to be a little “stealth” in my approach, but he had detected I was preaching about evangelism. Allow me to respond this way. Yes, I am. And I do not mean to be stealthy about it. Evangelism is spreading the Good News that in Christ the love of God is made real here and now. We evangelize in different ways, according to the gifts God has given each of us individually. Some preach. Others teach. Others serve the poor and broken in the name of Christ. Still others use their gift of hospitality, inviting folks outside the circle inside. We have received the peace of Christ. It is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Receive that Spirit. Give it. By whatever means you can spread the Good News, get to it. Because rarely if ever in our lifetimes have our community, our nation and all the world needed peace more than now. Receive that Spirit. Give it. Spread the word. Experience peace. Offer others the opportunity to know the peace of Christ as well.