

"I will not leave you orphaned..." Jesus says. "I will not abandon you... you will not be alone – you will have another Advocate to be with you... forever!"

- What was it that prompted Jesus to utter these words of promise to his disciples?
- Why did *they* need to hear them?

Today's Gospel reading is a continuation of last week's reading... which means that these words were spoken into the highly strained / emotional atmosphere of that upper room on the night before Jesus was crucified.

Peter's denial has already been predicted... and Judas has already slipped out into the night to do his dark deed of betrayal. In other words...

- It is as Jesus is saying "good bye"... trying to prepare his disciples for his "departure" and what comes next... that he promises them the presence of the Holy Spirit.
- It is as Jesus awaits his own arrest, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension... that he assures his disciples / his friends that his presence will still be known / felt – in and through the Holy Spirit.
- It is as the disciples are trying to digest / make sense of Jesus' news... that they hear this promise that the Holy Spirit—the Comforter, the Helper, the Advocate—will come and be present with them—always!

So... this isn't Jesus standing behind a pulpit giving a lecture (or even a sermon). This is Jesus sitting *with* his beloved disciples – looking into the confused / tear-filled / fear-filled eyes of Peter... of Thomas... of Philip... and the rest.

He has already told them—in last week's reading—not to be afraid... not to worry... that he is going away to prepare a place for them. But they are still upset... they are still deeply troubled—the fear of loss / abandonment is NOT so easily put aside / defeated, is it?!

And so... he tries to assure them. **THIS** is *why* Jesus says, with a heart full of compassion and love: *"My friends, I will not abandon you. I am not going to leave you orphaned. Please don't be afraid. It's going to be okay... You're going to be okay. Really! I know this looks and sounds bad—and yes, parts of what is to come will be bad... really bad. But in the end, I will be with you in a way you cannot even begin to imagine right now. This Holy Spirit—this Advocate... this Helper... this Comforter—really will help you. Through this Spirit you really will come to understand... and you really will still be connected to me! It's going to be okay... I promise!"*

Do you see how vital the promised Holy Spirit was for Jesus' disciples in that time?

Do see how vital the Holy Spirit is for us – in our lives... today... and everyday?

Jesus spoke these words into hurting, confused, lonely, grief-filled, disoriented hearts. Hearts in need of HOPE... PROMISE... COMFORT. Hearts, in some ways, like ours right now...

As your pastor, I will admit... these past weeks have been hard—really hard!

I have felt a level of uncertainty / disorientation / grief / loneliness / "alone-ness" that I have never felt before. Being separated from you all—not able to sit with you when you are hurting or sick... not able to hug you in greeting... not able to visit you and share communion with you—it doesn't feel good. And

preaching to an empty sanctuary – this doesn't feel good either... even though I know this is all for you—for us—our way of staying connected to each other and to God / God's Word for us. But it's lonely... and disorienting... it hurts!

And... I know that this less-than-ideal way of life hasn't been easy for any of you, either. None of us like knowing we need to stay physically "distant" in order to try to protect those we love. None of us like having to stay "away" from in-person gatherings of people—be it in church or school... concerts or other venues—because of this air-borne virus that has already killed so many. Even if we *understand* "why" restrictions have been put in place—all of them for our health and safety... especially for the health and safety of the elderly / most vulnerable among us—we still don't like it.

So many feel alone / lonely... grief-filled... "abandoned"... and disoriented / unsure these days. None of us know, for sure, what the coming weeks will bring... BUT we know that the "danger" this virus holds is NOT past... or gone...

Dear friends, as in that upper room long ago, I know that Jesus understands our loneliness / alone-ness... our fears and grief... our sense of abandonment—NOT in some "divine" / aloof and detached way... devoid of feeling / personal experience. No, **Jesus knows** this all "from the inside out"... in a very personal way—as One who lived it / experienced it for himself.

And **he knows** that what lies ahead for us – we cannot do on our own.

He knows that what we will have to face – we cannot do without his help.

And so, like he did for his disciples long ago... he now does for us—he promises us his presence and power—through the Spirit—to accompany us and help us... to be our Helper and Companion and Guide... our Advocate...

When Jesus tells us that we will not be abandoned like orphans—he means it.

When Jesus tells us that we have another Advocate... Helper... Comforter... who "*comes along side us*"—he means it. The same Spirit promised to his disciples in one of their darkest hours... is promised to us, too!

I think *this* is a word of promise that we all need to hear—perhaps now more than ever!

Now, I want to remind you, that the word Jesus uses to describe the Spirit here, in John's Gospel, is a very specific / distinct word: *paracletos* – literally, "*one who comes along side you.*" It can be translated in a number of different ways: as comforter, helper, counselor, encourager... but it's most literal translation is the one we have in our reading: "advocate" = one who pleads your case... who takes your side... who stands up for you... who intercedes for you...

Often when we hear the word "advocate" – we think of it in a legal sense: that it is the Spirit's job to stand with us / plead our case before God, the judge... that God needs to be, somehow, *persuaded* to love and forgive us. But **what if** we have it all backwards... **what if** it is the other way around?! **What if** the Spirit is the One who intercedes on God's behalf *before us*... who comes to remind us who we are, and perhaps more importantly, whose we are? **What if** the Spirit is the One who comes along side us to advocate *for us* / stand with us... in the face of all that causes us to doubt ourselves – our worth / importance... our belonging – not just in God's eyes... but in this world too?!

Dear friends, WE *have* an Advocate—One who is looking out for us / is on our side. One who supports and encourages us / helps and comforts us... and walks with us – always. One who speaks up for us / who stands with us through the good and bad... the ups and the downs. One who is “invested” in us—our life / our future / our well-being... who will NOT give up on us, no matter what.

It’s good to be reminded of that, isn’t it?! And this isn’t just any old advocate. This is ***the Advocate***—the Holy Spirit—whom God has given to us / bestowed on us in and through the waters of baptism!

This isn’t the first Advocate... it’s the second. Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as “another Advocate.” So our first Advocate is Jesus. Jesus *was* and *is* our Advocate!

As the Rev. Dr. David Lose so aptly put it in his commentary on this reading: *In Jesus, God came and lived among us... so that we might see and know God... and what God wants for us—a life of health and wholeness... relationship and beloved community... blessing and more (so much more)—what John sums up in his gospel as “abundant life.”*

God came in Christ Jesus... and lived and offered this abundant life – even when it riled up those in power who wanted to “control” life... even when it cost Jesus’ his own life.

In fact, God came in Jesus and willingly suffered and died on the cross so that we would know just how much God loves and cares for us... just how far God is willing to go to show us God’s deep and all-encompassing love—for us and for this world.

But that wasn’t enough. So God also raised Jesus from the dead... to show us that even death cannot keep God from loving us / redeeming us / giving us life.

And even that wasn’t enough. So God continues to come in the Holy Spirit... to support us and encourage us... to look out for us and care for us... to be with us and walk along side us ... and point us, always, to Jesus... to God.

The “good news” that comes to us today is this: **God comes to us as the Holy Spirit** to be “like Jesus” for us today – here... and now! **God comes to us as the Holy Spirit** to be another Advocate—***our Advocate***—who will never leave us or forsake us... who will never give up on us... who will guide us and teach us, remind us and abide with us, comfort us and intercede for us... who will open the eyes of our hearts to show us our loving Savior... and Father.

Even in the darkest, hardest times in our lives... when we face life’s trials... when we find ourselves fighting an “enemy” that can’t be seen... when we feel “alone” / abandoned (as many do these days)—**the Spirit** is here! Comforting us and helping us through... reminding us of God’s presence and love... so that we can “be there” for others... doing the same!

This is important. **It is the Spirit** that helps us not just survive in the midst of the upheavals and challenges of these days... but to thrive, even flourish... to “live” boldly / fully amid them. And **it is the Spirit** that leads and empowers us to do the same—to be “advocates” to and for those around us—helping them and comforting them... walking with them and standing up for them... encouraging them and lifting them up.

This is, in fact, one of the ways we know the Spirit’s ongoing presence and power in our midst—whenever we see ourselves and others doing this “Spirit work” ...

That *is* “good news” – indeed!