

Message for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A (5/17/20)

John 14:15-21

“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth....”

Whenever we translate scripture from its original languages, we make choices about its meaning. Translation is the first step in interpretation. That’s how we end up with passages that sound different depending on the version of the Bible, for instance, God’s encounter with the prophet Elijah at the mouth of the cave in 1 Kings 19. God is not to be found in wind, earthquake, or fire, the narrator tells us, but then Elijah hears... what? The New King James Version preserves an old translation: Elijah hears “a still small voice.” But, the New International Version of the Bible translates the same Hebrew phrase “a gentle whisper.” And, the New Revised Standard Version, the translation we most often use, renders that very same phrase “a sound of sheer silence.” So, which is it? Does Elijah sense the presence of God in a voice, a whisper, or in silence? The Hebrew is flexible. Which translation best captures the intended meaning?

Translators face a similar dilemma in the Gospel assigned for today. As Jesus bids a long goodbye to his disciples in the Gospel of John, he makes them a promise: *I have to leave you, but I won’t abandon you*. How hard it must be for them to accept this assurance, that Jesus’ death won’t be the end of their experiment with the kingdom of God, the end of their hope for a truly abundant life. He’s guided them like a good shepherd, cared for them like a devoted servant, and loved them like a faithful friend. How can they possibly hold on to this relationship once he’s gone? How will the next generation come to know him in the first place?

“I will ask the Father,” Jesus says, “and he will give you another *Parakletos*, to be with you forever.” In Greek, *Parakletos* literally means “one who is called alongside,” the term used for a Greco-Roman defense lawyer. Our translation renders it Advocate, but other versions of the Bible settle on different words: Intercessor, Counselor, Helper, Comforter, Companion. *Parakletos* has many possible meanings. So, which is it? How are we to understand the Spirit, God’s gift to the disciples in Jesus’ physical absence? Is it an advocate, or intercessor, or counselor, or helper, or comforter, or companion? The answer, of course, is yes. It’s fitting that the Gospel writer of John uses such richly fluid language to describe the Holy Spirit. After all, the Spirit of God is wild and free. How can we bring words to the wordless?¹

¹ Kris Rocke, Preaching Peace table, Tacoma, 5/12/20.

Note that Jesus promises *another Parakletos*, which is to say that Jesus has also been a *Parakletos*, one called alongside. “This [other] ‘advocate,’ Karoline Lewis explains, “is who Jesus has already been for his disciples – guiding, teaching, reminding, abiding, witnessing, interceding, comforting.”² In other words, the Spirit represents continuity. The cross will not be the end of the story. Jesus will accompany his beloved even beyond the boundary of death. “I will not leave you orphaned,” he insists, “I am coming to you.” The Spirit will facilitate the encounter.

How else can we make sense of the notion that Christ is among us? What business does a first-century Galilean rabbi have relating to twenty-first-century disciples? If it’s not in our imagination, if it’s not just a cherished memory, then God’s own initiative must make the difference. Martin Luther is clear on this point: “I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel....”³

The Holy Spirit has moved me to faith in the living Christ. The Holy Spirit has opened my heart to his accompaniment in good times and bad. The Holy Spirit. Another *Parakletos*.

Friends, physical separation is not final separation. That affirmation applies to the risen Christ, but it also applies to the community of his followers. For if the Holy Spirit gathers us to our good shepherd across time and space, it also gathers us to one another. “The Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel... just as [it] calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth.”⁴

So, rest in the promise of the Spirit’s arrival, bearing Jesus to you wherever you may be. Trust the Spirit’s power to enliven and encourage you in times of weariness and uncertainty. And, even when God is distant or unknown, when you can’t bring yourself to pray, listen for the same Spirit to intercede on your behalf with sighs too deep for words.⁵

² “A Time for Accompaniment,” <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5433>.

³ The Small Catechism.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Romans 8:26.