

“The Advocate”

John 14:15-31

April 15, 2007

So, here we are post-Easter. Now what?

Christ is risen – almost 2,000 years ago. What has he done for us lately?

As we move into this Easter-tide – a season celebrating God’s victory in raising Jesus from the dead – we are going to turn our attention to the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth, the third person of the Trinity sent by the Father and by the Son to indwell us.

We begin looking at the Holy Spirit with Jesus. During his last night with his disciples, Jesus talked about the things that really matter. He has given them words of encouragement, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” He has been direct about his identity, “Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” Jesus’ purpose, his mission, his life are all coming to a decisive point.

This is where Jesus introduces the disciples to the Holy Spirit. Hear Jesus’ words:

John 14:15-31.

Chapters 13 – 17 of John give us Jesus’ last night with his disciples. It includes Jesus’ washing the feet of the disciples, the betrayal, these final words; then, in chapter 17, what is called Jesus’ high priestly prayer. In his final words, Jesus talks about the Holy Spirit four times – our passage, in 15:26-27, and in 16:12-15. Why now? Why did Jesus make such a big deal about the Holy Spirit on this night?

A. God does not leave us alone.

There is an important first lesson in Jesus’ words: God does not leave us alone. Not even for a little bit.

For the disciples, this is something they know, but it is something they do not always feel. It is true for us, too; intellectually, we know that God is with us, but often we feel as if he is not.

Yet, the reality is God *has always been* with the disciples and with us. The commandments, the covenants, the law and the prophets all bear witness to God’s presence. God *is* with them. For the disciples, it was even in Jesus’ name: he is Emmanuel, God with us. God *will always be* with them. “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.” Jesus promises that he will send the Holy Spirit to be with them – forever.

1. The Absentee God

God is present with us, all the time. Does it make any difference to you to know that? For many people, it does. This concrete promise stands in contrast to many impressions that people – even believers – have about God.

For example, some people believe that God created everything, spun it off into motion, and then took a break. God is distant and absent and not very interested in the creation he has made. Otherwise, goes the thinking, why would this world have so many problems? All of the wars, and crime, and disease, and poverty, and injustice, and so on – how could all these exist with a God who cares and is present?

I was flipping around the channels the other night and came across a movie I think is entitled, “Network.” I have known about this film but have never seen it fully (and still haven’t) – the only bit I saw was a segment where a rain-soaked Albert Finney is put on the air and he gives a speech that basically rails against the isolation and loneliness that characterizes many lives. He talks about how dangerous and violent and crazy it is; then he gets up from behind the desk and urges viewers to go to their windows and shout out a phrase that ends, “...and I’m not going to take it any more.” He repeats this exhortation over and over. The shot then changes to people in apartment buildings, opening their windows and following his instruction. The noise goes from a single voice to a cacophony of voices. The camera settles on one face; a man who seems to have been released from a great pressure and has found peace in hearing by the noise he is not alone.

Then a commercial came on, I lost interest, and moved onto something else.

And that’s the point.

God does not look at our world with a remote control. He does not blip in for a moment, check on what happens, lose interest and move onto something else. He hears the cries of his people. He is with them in their times of loss and pain. He hurts with them over injustice. Even on his way to the cross, Jesus makes it clear that God will not leave believers. “I will ask the Father,” Jesus says, “and he will send you another Counselor to be with you always.”

2. The Angry God.

Another way people look at God is the angry man in the clouds with lightning in his hand just waiting for us to make a mistake so that he can blast us. This presents God as being stand-offish; that somehow he is not interested in being with us, but takes pleasure in destroying us. It is like the striped-shirted little boy with a magnifying glass looking for ants on a hot summer day. There is a random meanness that makes God unapproachable and unloving.

Although judgment is serious and God’s holiness is certain, the vindictive “Big Brother” perception of God does not match the Bible’s revelation of God. God does not keep himself separate from us. He takes no pleasure in our failure and rebellion against him.

And he does something about it. The problem is his coming to us looks very different than the expressions of power we expect; he comes to us in weakness, in the power of the one who was crucified, in the still small voice that speaks to us.

Jesus was Emmanuel, God with us. He lived with the disciples, walked with them, ate with them, laughed and cried with them. The Bible tells us that he came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. The Bible tells us that he who knew no sin became sin for our benefit so that sin could be destroyed on the cross. And Jesus tells the disciples during this last night, “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.”

B. There is conflict between the world and God.

Jesus’ description of the Holy Spirit reveals another important reality: that the world is still in rebellion against God. Jesus says it this way, “This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him.”

Consider what is happening as Jesus tells the disciples those words; what is happening to him right then and right there. He was speaking in the last moments before his arrest. The world did not receive Jesus; it rejected, betrayed, condemned and crucified him. It did not see him for who he was. Jesus’ words to his disciples then are just as accurate today. The world continues to not see the Holy Spirit and continues to find any way to ignore, reject, or subvert the meaning of the resurrection.

Here in the United States, the conflict between the world and God can seem like it is something that is far away – as if real persecution only happens in other countries. I understand that: I drove to church this morning without any real fear of being pulled from my car and arrested for being Christian. There is no secret handshake at the door, no sign, no special code-word to get into the sanctuary for worship. So, where exactly, do we find in our experience that the world cannot receive the Spirit of truth?

Hostility to God comes in many forms: some outright rejection, others apathetic. Many of us have experienced the fear of outright rejection – that not only will someone be offended by our mentioning Jesus, but that we will lose our friendship with them. We will suggest restaurants, we will suggest activities, we will suggest shopping opportunities or great deals; but when it comes to sharing the only news of eternal value – we experience that fear, “they don’t want me imposing my beliefs on them.” Where do we get that fear? It is not unfounded: when we follow the lead of the Holy Spirit, we can expect the same reaction. “This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him or knows him.”

Apathy is the other thing we encounter. Apathy is the hostility of affluence. It occurs when we believe we do not need God. In a society where shelter, food, and water are all available – even at a high price – the problems that require God may seem far away. The Presbytery of San Diego subscribes to a demographic research company called “Percept.” It produces reports based upon postal zip codes. A few years back, I looked at a report for the areas surrounding Westminster in Escondido. Two things were remarkable: one, the majority of people who identified themselves

as Hispanic (which was a majority in the zip codes I was researching) had no church affiliation – they were not even nominally Catholic. Second, when asked what their top priorities were, the majority of all respondents indicated that entertainment, followed by good schools and a few other things were their prime concerns. Spiritual matters, though listed, did not make the top ten. In other words most people felt they needed entertainment more than a personal relationship with God.

But this is not the case with believers. The promise of the Spirit is a tremendous comfort to believers in a world hostile to God. It has been my experience – and perhaps it has been yours, too – that when people have big problems (health, relationships, family issues), they want to talk to a person of faith even if they do not have a faith themselves. I had someone in another church tell me about how great her pastor is; then she said this, “I don’t know if I believe in all of that, but I want to be a part of a church where the pastor believes it.” How much more comforting, then, to know the truth *before* those crises occur than to be looking for it *after*.

It also has been my experience that people who have seemed apathetic come when they cannot shake the emptiness their self-centered pursuit of fulfillment. They seem to sense it and come to believers to ask questions. They often try not to let on that they are experiencing doubts and ask questions to test believers. For me, the times when I have seen this happen most is when I have returned from a mission trip. People will ask, “Why would you spend your vacation doing that? What was in it for you?” Ah, the open door! Even then, Jesus’ words come back to me, “the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him or knows him.”

C. The Holy Spirit confirms, teaches, and builds up believers in the faith.

If Jesus means that God is always with us, and if the world will not receive him, what is the Holy Spirit is doing while he is with us?

Jesus told the disciples, “He lives with you and will be in you.” In other words, the Holy Spirit’s work on us is ongoing. He is more than Jiminy Cricket or a little version of yourself sitting on your shoulder. The Spirit lives within you, works within you, and on your behalf. The desire to be a disciple of Jesus? It is the work of the Holy Spirit. The desire to be a part of a Bible study? It is the work of the Holy Spirit. The compelling discernment between right and wrong? It is the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit takes an active role in developing us to be part of the Kingdom of God. His work involves both sanctification and deepening our love for God. The Holy Spirit, whom Jesus calls “the Counselor,” is sent from the Father and the Son to “teach you all things” and “to remind you of everything I have said.” Many people grew up memorizing Scripture verses. Do any of those come back to you in the midst of conversation? It is the work of the Holy Spirit reminding you.

We do not have a complete understanding of the relationship of the Holy Spirit and the Son and the Father; the inner working of the trinity is a mystery beyond our comprehension. Even so, what we do know (as God has revealed) is the Spirit participated in creation, was present with Jesus at his baptism, was integral in raising Jesus from dead, and inspired the disciples on Pentecost, forming the early church. The Spirit has been active in the development of the

Scriptures we have, in which – what? – we are taught all things and reminded of everything Jesus has said.

That's fine when we are talking about the Holy Spirit in theory and in the Bible, But let me stop here for a moment: often times, when we start talking about the Holy Spirit in believer's lives, there is a sense in which we enter into the realm of the wacky and uncontrollable. The sensational manifestations of the Holy Spirit spook many believers: crying, shaking, speaking in tongues, falling down (also known as being "slain in the Spirit") and other things. I know those things can make people uncomfortable – how do you know whether those things are real or are someone putting on an act? We will talk about those things later in the series.

For this morning, however, I want you to hear this simple message: God is always with you; the Holy Spirit has come, manifesting God's love for you and for the purpose of training you up in God's righteousness. You are not alone. The same God who created you, the same God who redeemed you through the blood of Jesus Christ, the same God who promises you eternal life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ; that same God comes to you and lives in you by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So, as we ask the impertinent question, "What have you done for me lately, God?", we can have confidence that the answer is, "More than you can know or see." Amen? Amen.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

8:45 offering

10:00 offering