

## 5/2/21 WORSHIP SERVICE

### WELCOME – PASTOR CALEB

Good morning and welcome to Alexanderwohl on this fine spring morning. It is good to be gathered in this space, recognizing that we are also joined by additional people tuning in on Zoom.

We welcome all of you, and hope that the Spirit that Jesus promised connects us from wherever we are.

This is the third and final Sunday we are exploring the many names and images of God, today turning to the many pictures that we have of the Holy Spirit in the Bible.

I also can't forget to mention that this is the last service I will be with you all before beginning my sabbatical tomorrow. I'll be back in a few months, but acknowledge this will be a major change for both me and you, and it makes this service all the more important for me.

Before we go further, let's pause for any announcements or opportunities.

### INTRODUCTION TO CALL TO WORSHIP

For each of these three weeks, I've created a corporate call to worship using names and imagery for each person of the Trinity. If you have your bulletins, let's read and pray these words together, addressed to the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to his followers.

### MORNING PRAYER - PASTOR LOIS

Spirit of Love and all that is, you breathe life into every living thing. You sustain life as it grows and changes. And you are present when life ends and as it returns to you. You are the beginning and the end of all that we know and all that we are – we confess that we cannot comprehend you. We can't explain or define you or hold you in our minds. And yet, God, we feel your presence. We know you are with us as we experience your love through the kindness of friends and family – and sometimes strangers. We know your presence when we're out, in the midst of your creation, under the sky, working the ground, pulling weeds, planting garden – we see your handiwork all around us. We know you're there, God as our bodies and spirits heal – from broken bones, from illness, from surgery or accidents, from trauma or grief. You've created us with remarkable healing power and for that we are grateful.

We pray for the family of Darrel Voth as they grieve his loss. We continue to pray for Larinda Amstutz, granddaughter of Connie Wiens, as she continues to heal from the car crash she was involved in. We pray for Janice as she undergoes her procedure on Wednesday. Be with her surgeon and the other medical folks. We thank you, God for healing she's already had and we pray for quick and complete healing from this procedure. Thank you God that Darlene Schmidt was able to return to her apartment this week. We ask for continued strength and healing for her. We pray for Lois Janzen as she recovers and the doctors continue to observe and diagnose her health status. Be especially near to her, God as she's in the hospital, waiting, having tests, wondering what the outcomes will be. Be with her family too as they wait with her. We pray

for her healing and well-being, God. We give you thanks and praise for the healing and wellness that Pete Flaming has had for these last 5 years since his heart transplant – what a miracle!

Gracious Spirit of God we pray now for Pastor Caleb as he brings the message this morning that you have worked alongside of him to prepare. May the words of his mouth and the meditations of his heart be acceptable to you, God. Thank you for Caleb, for his faith and his faithfulness. Thank you for Beth, for Austin and Josiah. We ask for your blessings, God, on Caleb and on this family as they have this time of sabbatical. May your Spirit guide, nudge, encourage, challenge and renew during this time. Be with us here at Alexanderwohl as we carry on and follow your lead for us and with us.

Be present with us now through the rest of this worship service – may we receive what is most needed. We pray through the Spirit of Jesus. Amen.

#### PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Please stand and join me in the prayer of dedication for our offerings – number 1024

Leader: There is no scarcity. There is no shortage. No lack of love, of compassion, of joy in the world. There is enough. There is more than enough. Only fear and greed make us think otherwise. No one need starve.

People: There is enough land and enough food.

Leader: No one need die of thirst.

People: There is enough water.

Leader: No one need live without mercy.

People: There is no end to grace.

Leader: And we are all instruments of grace.

People: The more we give it, the more we share it, the more we use it, the more God makes.

Leader: There is no scarcity of love.

#### “ANOTHER ADVOCATE” – PASTOR CALEB John 14:15-27

Most of us can relate to some kind of experience where either the person in charge was leaving, and you had to manage without the leadership you were used to...

Or, you were the person in charge and were leaving, permanently or for a time, and had to take steps to say farewell and encourage a seamless transition. Many teachers have experienced this, especially if you have to go on maternity leave.

It takes a lot of planning for this transition to go well.

Out of my own life experience, I recall the two weeks when my parents traveled to Zimbabwe for the Mennonite World Conference. My sisters are younger than me; two were in high school and the third in elementary school.

I was in charge for a time, but soon the time came for me to leave and drive 15 hours to begin my second year of college. That in itself was an accomplishment without a mother pushing to make sure I was keeping up with packing. Now my younger sisters got left behind a second time. I believe at this point they went to stay at houses of friends until my parents returned.

In the passage from John's Gospel that Chrystiana read, Jesus is spending intimate time with the inner circle of disciples, preparing them for the next season after his death, in which he will not live with them in person.

This is not abandonment. Jesus promises the disciples that they will see him. Jesus refers both to his future appearances after his resurrection. Jesus *also* refers to his Presence that will continue to live among them in the form of the Holy Spirit.

#### CONTEXT OF JOHN

In verse 16, Jesus says, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever."

First, the fact that Jesus says "another Advocate," means that Jesus has been their Advocate all along, and now another Advocate will come in his place.

But what does Advocate even mean? That is the NRSV translation. Other common English translations say Comforter, Counselor, or Helper. You maybe or may not have heard the word Paraclete before. Some choose to say "Paraclete" because there just is no word in the English language that quite does this role justice.

Verse 26 says, "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything..." So it is clear this Advocate is the gift of the Holy Spirit, and that the role of the Spirit is to keep us focused on living out the teachings of Jesus.

Later, Jesus compares the pain that the disciples will experience with his death to the pain of a mother going into labor (ch. 16:21-22). After the baby is born, she forgets that pain (well, sort of). The new joy after the pain of the crucifixion will be the presence of risen Christ among them. It is to their advantage that Jesus goes away, for this allows the Holy Spirit-Advocate to come.

#### IMAGES OF THE SPIRIT

Let's come back to the idea of the Advocate or Paraclete and first look at some of the other names and images we have for the Spirit in Scripture.

Often it is the hardest for Christians to know how to talk about the Holy Spirit or even understand the Spirit. Jesus used the comparison with wind that you can hear and feel on your face, but you don't know where it came from or where it's going.

We usually associate the Holy Spirit with the event of Pentecost after Jesus' resurrection. We often imagine the Spirit coming after Jesus. But actually, the Spirit is present from the beginning moments of creation.

#### CREATOR SPIRIT/WIND/BREATH

The second verse of our Bibles reads in the NIV: *"Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters."*

There you go, there's the Spirit. Except no so fast, the NRSV has *"the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters."*

That's not the same. Now it seems like God simply sent a gust of gaseous mixture of mostly nitrogen and oxygen over water, versus the very first activity of the Spirit.

In Hebrew and Greek, the word for "spirit" has several related meanings, that already gives us multiple images. The word "spirit" can refer to an immaterial being, or to our personality or life-force apart from our physical bodies. It also is a common, everyday word for "wind" and "breath," so the images of wind and breath are common for describing the Holy Spirit.

When God creates the first human, God breathes into his nostrils, the "breath of life" (Gen 2:7). When Jesus appears to the whole group of disciples for the first time after his resurrection, he says, "receive the Holy Spirit" and breathes on them.

While most English translations give the pronoun "he" for the Spirit, the word for wind or spirit in Greek is an "it," while in Hebrew, it is grammatically feminine. This is likewise true for the related Aramaic and Syriac languages, and early Syriac Christian communities imagined the Holy Spirit in feminine terms.

#### FIRE

Another image for the Spirit is fire. At Pentecost the Spirit shows up as both the sound of a violent wind (we are no strangers to that in Kansas), and also as tongues of fire that rest on each person's head. The fiery flames symbolize the inspired words that they will be given in the native languages of the many travelers just outside.

#### INTERCESSOR

Finally, an image for the Spirit that appears in Romans 8 is of one who intercedes for us: *"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words"* (Rom 8:26).

That's a very comforting thought, and this is the depiction of the Spirit that is probably most like the idea of "paraclete."

#### PARACLETE

The Paraclete or Advocate is used outside of the NT to mean "one who is called to someone's aid" or "one who appears in another's behalf." It's not a technical term for a defense attorney, but it does have the sense of an advocate who supports and defends you.

In John, Jesus prepares his disciples to live in a world that won't understand them or be kind to them. The Spirit is their Advocate. The Advocate is the one who encourages, urges, comforts, and counsels us.

In John, the Advocate is also the Spirit of truth, who supplies the disciples with all that they need to know to be faithful to their master Jesus in his physical absence.

When we are thinking trinity (Father, Son, and Spirit) with separate categories for each, it may seem confusing that the New Testament really has quite a bit of blending between Christ and the Spirit.

For example, the Apostle Paul uses "Holy Spirit" interchangeably with the "Spirit of Christ" as if they are the same thing. Here in John, it is through the gift of the Spirit-Advocate that Jesus will come to the disciples, that they will see Jesus. That's how Jesus is in them and they in Jesus. It is also how they live, because Jesus lives.

Jesus is not focused on heaven in this passage, and we likewise, until the final stage of life, need something to hold onto in our present. Each gospel writer wrote with a different motivation or purpose. John was concerned with a faith community now separated from the Jewish synagogue and separated by some years from Jesus' earthly life. Their need is the assurance that they are not orphans. Christ is present with them in the Spirit.

The gift of the Spirit is available now, not as a band-aid for life's problems and struggles or a magic pill, but as a way to be a more rooted, more resilient people, grounded in love.

## LESSONS

I want to offer three lessons that we can take with us.

1. Recognize the Spirit within us and among us, if we are willing to receive it.

I like to think of the Spirit as the wisest voice and the strength that is already within me (as Jesus said, I am in the Father, you are in me, and I am in you).

I've taken comfort from this conviction when I've struggled, when even to believe in myself felt hard. You don't have to even believe in yourself, so to speak, if you simply trust that the resources, strength, and wisdom of the Spirit are already within you, if you have opened yourself to receiving and discovering that gift.

It's important to remember that in this passage, Jesus is not so much speaking about the Spirit within each individual disciple, as he is speaking about the Spirit who will be *among* the group as a whole. We equally need this conviction. Our congregation isn't perfect and we have challenges. But the Spirit is already among us.

You might feel like I take for granted that you all have a true relationship with God. Don't we have to do something special to know that the Spirit really abides with us? You don't just take that for granted? What are the steps to know that you have really accepted Christ and received the Holy Spirit?

We do in fact need to make a conscious choice to choose this faith, and we need to consciously invite the presence of God in our lives through the Spirit. But it's remarkable how the Spirit is typically the subject and agent, not people. The Spirit fills, descends, hovers, burns, intercedes, advocates, creates, adopts, and transforms, all without our help.

My belief is that the Spirit is always moving whether or not we do anything, and that through the Spirit, God is always relentlessly pursuing us. Yet because God desires authentic relationship of love, God gives us the freedom to ignore, resist, or refuse.

If you are not actively resisting, I think you can rest assured that you are not far off.

## 2. The second lesson: Get off a little off your normal beaten path

One time I was attempting a prayer walk along a trail and couldn't remove myself from busy thoughts, so it didn't feel very prayerful at all as attended.

I felt a nudge to step off the trail where there was a creek. There I felt presence of God, and a sense of conversation with God, however that mediated that was by my own thought process. I also experienced it as not my own doing from praying "correctly."

The lesson is to take seriously the nudges that move you off the default path that you are on.

## 3. My last point: If you have no special sense of leading from the Spirit, go back to the teaching of Jesus, especially the command to love.

This is what Jesus continually emphasizes throughout his final words to his disciples. On the one hand, filling your plate with what sounds like good works doesn't by itself connect us to God.

But we also can't have a true connection of God, and truly offer the hospitality for the Spirit of Christ to dwell among us, without a sincere desire to make the radical teachings of Jesus the primary motivation for all of our daily choices.

I know that's an ongoing journey of discernment. But I think that is why Jesus' words in John never become too esoteric or lofty without being continually grounded in the command to love one another, which is always the messy work of relationships.

Once again:

1. Recognize the presence of the Spirit of Christ that is already among us and within you
2. Be willing to deviate from the beaten path
3. And keep coming back to Jesus' command to love one another.

## CONCLUSION

We've been talking about Jesus leaving and promising the Advocate in his place. I also have to acknowledge a limited parallel with my own leaving for sabbatical. You might be feeling a little like the disciples (or you might be thinking, finally we get a break from this guy!).

There's a major difference in that this is temporary, and I'm not at all indispensable the way Jesus is. You will do well. I entrust you to the leadership of Pastor Lois, as well as a number of congregational leaders, who are stepping up to allow ministries to continue to move forward.

This sabbatical is a tremendous gift. I am grateful for the opportunity for needed renewal. I am grateful to this congregation, and especially to the many people who will be contributing additional time and effort.

While we are getting closer to “normal” than we have been in over a year, there’s a lot of work that has to happen to navigate this transitional period. We believe the Spirit is with us all the time, and it’s our job to recognize presence of the Spirit, and the Advocate’s nudges and call.

This will be no less true during these next three months. I encourage you to remember the basics of Jesus’ teaching, which boils down to radical love. Remember that the Spirit of Christ is among you. You have what you need.

Anxiety is always understandable, and a struggle for many of us. But let’s hold that anxiety loosely. Instead of anxiety being the energy that drives what we do, I commend the peace that Jesus offers to you.

Again, the words of Jesus in verse 27: *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”*

#### BENEDICTION

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.