

I Will Not Leave You Orphaned

Scripture: The Gospel of John: A Montage

Focus: “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.”—John 14:18

If I leave you, it doesn’t mean I love you any less.—Warren Zevon, *Keep Me In Your Heart*

Sometimes when I’m having trouble getting started on a sermon, I’ll go back and read the old guys, the old preachers, I mean. What did *they* have to say about this verse, this Bible passage? Not just the Puritan preachers from the 1700’s or even the Reformers from the 1500’s but the *real* old guys: Augustine of Hippo, Gregory of Nysa, John Chrysostom and the like from the 3rd, 4th, and 5th centuries.

I know, I know: but desperate times require desperate measures. And I have to admit, it took me a while to appreciate them.

When first introduced to them, I thought their sermons were nothing but long—and I do mean, *long!*—series of strung-together Bible verses. If the editor inserted chapter and verse citations into the text (you know, parentheses John 1:1-2, comma, 9; parentheses John 14:18)? . . . Well, they cluttered up the whole page . . . I mean *every other* sentence . . .

And that’s just the *direct* quotations, mind you; if you included paraphrases, allusions, echoes, and rifts? . . . It would be nothing but parentheses. It was only when I read them more closely, and especially when I read them aloud to myself, that I could see what was going on.

They had so thoroughly internalized the Bible, taken in the Word of God—it had gotten so inside them, and they had gotten so inside it—that they simply thought and spoke—saw the world, themselves and God—in those terms. It was second nature to them—their montage of Scripture passages reflected that.

And I discovered that if I paid attention to the particular verses and passages they used, especially how and why they used them, the way they put them together—their order, organization, and implicit interpretations; the comparisons and the contrasts; the questions posed and the answers proposed through them; the stories told and retold, alluded to and touched upon; the resonances and consonances . . . when I paid attention like that . . . Well, *then*, I could hear their poetry.

That’s what I want to happen today: for us to get inside God’s Word and have God’s Word get inside us, so we can see, hear—and feel—the poetry of it all.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and Advent is that time in the church calendar, when we look forward to Christmas, when we look forward to Jesus’ coming into our world:

*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God . . . The true light, which enlightens everyone, was **coming** into the world (John 1:1-2, comma, 9) . . .*

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

Advent: the four weeks when we look forward to Christmas, when we look forward to Jesus' coming into our world.

Even before Milt and Dawn lit the first Advent candle, you could tell it was Advent from our introit: "Savior of the nations, **come**, Make **here** your home." And then you could tell it was Advent from our Opening Hymn: "Lord Christ, O Wondrous Love, When First You **Came** to Earth."

When **First** You Came to Earth. Because He also promised his disciples that He would come again.

The night they came to get him, to take him away, to kill him, to crucify him—that night, in that upper room, during that last supper, he told his disciples that he was going to—that he would have to—leave them:

John 13:1: "Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. . . . 'Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, but where I am going, you cannot come.'"

But for the disciples, this is unthinkable: If . . . if . . . if you **are** leaving us, does that mean that . . . that we're alone here, on our own, that you are—that God is—abandoning us?

That's the question on the disciples' minds, in their hearts, so deep that they can't even give it thought, much less voice. But Jesus knowing their hearts—having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end—Jesus, promises them this:

*"Little children, I will go and prepare a place for you, I will **come again** and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."*

There's faith, hope, and love in that promise, but it certainly doesn't answer all the disciples' questions:

When?—**when** will you "come again"? And **what?**—**what** happens to us—what are we to do—in the meantime? Again, Jesus, knowing their hearts, speaks to them:

As for when: "But about that day or hour no one knows . . . Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. . . ."

And as for what happens to them in the meantime: "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the *Advocate*, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you".

In the meantime, until Jesus comes again, whenever he comes again, they will *not* be alone: He will send the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit—the “Advocate.”

The Greek Word translated as “Advocate” here is “Paraclete.” It literally means someone who comes alongside you, and it’s a word notoriously hard to translate, at least with a single English word; it covers a whole range of meanings: Companion, Comforter, Consoler, Encourager; Guide, Teacher, Helper, Mentor; Spokesperson, Mediator, Intercessor, Interpreter; Witness and Exhorter; Friend.

And I actually think you can hear all of these meanings—the whole range—in what Jesus says next to them about the Holy Spirit:

“Because I have said I am going away, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you [companion comforter, consoler, encourager].

And when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth [guide, teacher, helper, mentor]; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears [spokesperson, mediator, intercessor, interpreter] and he will declare to you the things that are to come [witness, exhorter].

And so Jesus concludes: “This is the Spirit of truth, You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” The Holy Spirit—friend.

Yes, Jesus will come back—but that day or hour no one knows—so in the meantime, he will come alongside us in the person of the Holy Spirit.

“I will not leave you orphaned, I am coming to you” (John 14:18).

And that’s not just a promise for the disciples; it’s for us too. Because we feel it too. That fear, that dread so deep that often we can’t even give it thought, much less voice: Are *we* alone here? On our own? Has God abandoned *us* and our world?

We all know what it’s like, what it feels like, literally or figuratively, one way or another, at one time or another, to be orphaned. Maybe all the time, maybe it’s part of our human condition, at least our fallen human condition, maybe it’s in the air we breathe in our modern world.

“The fate of our times, Max Weber wrote, “is characterized, above all, by the disenchantment of the world.”

A *disenchanted* world—a world without magic, wonder, or mystery. A world in which the sacred has been lost. A purely horizontal world—a world from which God and the Word are conspicuously absent. A world in which we are—and the world itself is— orphaned.

So when does the Holy Spirit come?

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak.” (Acts 2:1-4)

Stop there: it’s at this point, let’s be honest, where we Presbyterians start to get . . . well, nervous. It’s not that we don’t believe in the Holy Spirit, it’s not that we doubt that this is what happened at Pentecost, forty days after Jesus ascended into heaven . . .

It’s just that all this whooshing and rushing; and blowing and burning; and filling and dividing; and shouting and babbling; and *rolling* around—and all that’s fine for *other* people, for *other* denominations and traditions, but I mean, *we’re Presbyterian*: “Let all things be done decently and in order” (I Corinthians 14:40).

So when does the Holy Spirit come?

That account of that first Pentecost that I just read is from Luke, the second chapter of the Book of Acts. But in John’s Gospel, the coming of the Holy Spirit is different: rather than being forty days after Jesus’ ascending to heaven, it’s evening on Easter Sunday. The disciples are sitting alone, hiding in that upper room, wondering about the unbelievable report that Mary Magdalene brought back that morning from his tomb, and—:

Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22)

He breathed on them: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’—soft as the softest breath. Breathe on me, breath of God.

So when does the Holy Spirit come, as *our* friend?

“I will not leave you orphaned, [walk to behind the table] I will not leave you orphaned, I am coming to you” (John 14:18).

Here at this table: Here, the Holy Spirit comes alongside us here, as our friend, soft as the softest breath. To take in the Word of God, his flesh and blood [pick up elements], to have it—Him—get inside us and us inside Him. That’s what happens at this table in communion, and not just at this table, but anywhere, anytime, because that gentle breath will blow where it will, here and there, now and then, perhaps when we least expect it, during Advent, too.

That’s my hope and prayer—that here at this table and during the next four weeks, I hope and pray that we will come alive to the magic, wonder, and mystery, the sacredness and the beauty and the joy of Advent on the way to Christmas. Come alive to the poetry of it all—:

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. “You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.”

Peace be with you. Receive the Holy Spirit.

“I will not leave you orphaned, I am coming to you” (John 14:18).

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.