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“I Will Not Leave you Desolate”

John 14: 18-26

The Gospel of John, more than any other Gospel, tells the story of the Passion of our Lord from the perspective of the Resurrection. A word of assurance pervades his presentation of the agony of the Christ. I think this stylistic difference from Matthew, Mark and Luke has to do with audience and the situation he addresses. I think the first readers of the Johannine Gospel were living in a time when they felt very much alone. John was writing to a people who felt somewhat abandoned, even disoriented. By the time John's Gospel was published, the Christian community had been expelled from the synagogue, and the relationship between the Christians and their fellow Jews was not a good one, in truth, with some blame falling on both parties. Moreover, the Christians were becoming increasingly alienated from the Roman government. Having lost their status as a Jewish faith, they had also thereby lost their legal status: they were now being characterized as a new religion, and new religions were forbidden by the state. So, the first Christians who read John's Gospel would have felt as if they were living in uncharted, dangerous territory.

So, even as we look at the story of the Passion of the Christ, we find also a corresponding emphasis on the comforting presence of the Holy Spirit – a shocking emphasis on the Spirit as the power of the reassuring presence of God. In John's understanding of Holy Week, the terror of the loss of the Christ is balanced with the coming of the Spirit, a theme that our Lord sounds like the recurring toll of a bell:

John 14: 16: “I will pray to the Father and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth. . . . You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.”

John 14: 25: “The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”

John 15: 26: “When the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me.”

John 16: 7ff: “It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away the Counselor will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes he will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.”

John 16: 12ff: “I have many things to say to you but you cannot hear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. . . He will glorify me for he takes what is mine and declares it to you.”

I say again, though the Gospel of John purports to be about the person of Christ, there is a shocking emphasis throughout on the person of the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, the truth of the matter is, most of us do not give sufficient attention to the presence of God's Spirit in our lives. We tend to think of the Spirit as a scary concept. We tend to equate the Spirit's power with ecstatic possession, with so-called “holy rollers” giving vent to some Pentecostal, emotional excess. But to equate the power of the Holy Spirit with Pentecostal outbursts is tantamount to equating the earth's crust with the eruption of volcanoes: sure,

the Spirit's power may occasionally be manifested in such ecstatic outbursts but generally, like the earth's crust, the Spirit simply and unobtrusively supports and sustains life. Generally, the Spirit is a reality we take for granted. Think instead of God's Spirit as an abiding counselor. Think of God's Spirit as a voice of wise instruction. Think of God's Spirit as a guiding influence. Think of the Spirit as the energy of life. Think of the Spirit as the counsel of God, directing your decisions, informing your choices and granting you the energy to love. To me that doesn't sound anything like a scary, ecstatic, out-of-body moment of "possession." To know the Spirit is to know God's inner Counsel. "I will go away," says our Lord, but the loss of intimacy known in relationship with the earthly Christ is to be replaced by intimacy with the guidance of the Spirit. This sustaining strength of the Spirit is to be the very voice of the divine in our lives.

Frequently, many of us equate the voice of the Spirit with that of our conscience. I suppose there are times when the conscience and the Counselor are one and the same. But the conscience is formed by a variety of influences from our upbringing. Conscience is not divine. Conscience can be comprised of influences that are both positive and negative. Some of us go through life nagged and haunted by a conscience that has been shaped by authority figures who had warped values themselves. The conscience is not always a true guide; its benefit is mixed. But the voice of the Counselor is a voice that comes from beyond us. It is the voice of God, the wisdom of God. To hear this voice from beyond us requires disciplined intentionality. Disciplined intentionality, just to hear the voice of God's counsel. Moreover, to follow that voice of God requires disciplined intentionality. Disciplined intentionality!

In trying to convey to you the function of the Counselor in our lives, I thought of a little Christmas book that Cathy Hartsell gave my children years before, a Frederick Forsyth short story entitled, *The Shepherd*. The Shepherd is about a fighter pilot on Christmas Eve whose jet had experienced a main fuse blowout, leaving him without most of his instruments. He suspects that he is a dead man. But as he was flying over the ocean, contemplating his options, the voice of an old flight instructor comes into his head, unbidden. He can hear the voice of old flight instructor Norris as clearly as if he was sitting beside him, counseling him to reduce the throttle setting to give his craft more airtime, and to attract the attention of some radar scanner by adopting the odd behavior of flying in small triangles, flying in one direction two minutes, then turning left and doing the same for another two minutes, then turning left and doing the same for another two minutes, then repeating the process. The voice of that old flight instructor, his calm, his wisdom, even his humor, is a key factor in the pilot's eventual salvation. That's how the Spirit functions in our lives, as a calm, wise, even humorous voice that guides us and contributes to our salvation.

There is a terrible irony to this scene. Jesus has said to the disciples, "Where I am going, you cannot go," but then he said later, "Where I am going, you will follow afterward." The disciples are mourning as Jesus goes into Gethsemane, but they do not realize that soon they will be going into their own personal Gethsemanes. Jesus is saying to them, "You mourn because I leave you, but I give you the Counselor to sustain you not only in the wake of my loss, but as you need the assurance of God's presence when you are cast into the jail cell, when you need the strength of God's Spirit as you are tied to the whipping post, when you need the counsel of God's voice as you stand before a judge. The disciples are mourning the betrayal, arrest, torture and death of their Lord; but they are soon to follow the path of martyrdom themselves. So Jesus says to them, "I will not leave you desolate." The Counselor is not merely to aid them as Jesus goes to the cross; the Spirit will be there for them as they go to the cross themselves.

The Spirit is given to us as well. Our Lord says, "Take up your cross and follow." But everyone's cross is different and unique. Everyone's unique cross is part of their singular definition of faith, bearing their cross unto God. But we do not bear our cross alone – the Spirit of sustenance, of counsel, of wisdom, of energy is an ever present resource. Our Lord says, "You must abide in God and let God abide in you." God's abiding

in us comes through our Lord's initiative, but God requires our active complicity. Our Lord promises to abide with us, but only if we covenant with him to hearken to his voice. As we bear our cross, especially in this Holy Week, let us tap the Resource that God has given us, the power of the Presence of the Holy Spirit of the Christ.

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer,
Holy Week Wednesday, April 12, 2006