

It sure gets my attention whenever Jesus promises that He's going to do something for us so wonderful we'd be better off without Him. Yours, too?

This promise of His is exactly where our lessons began this morning: just before He was put to death, Jesus promised His followers that they would benefit by His leaving them behind down here; if He did not go on ahead to be with God the Father in the next dimension, then God the Holy Spirit could not come to be present and active in Christ's followers, His Church. In any case, His Church would be better off without Him physically hanging around.

(This Fourth Gospel uses a unique name/title for the Holy Spirit whom Jesus promised to send. Depending on your Bible translation, you might read that Jesus promised to send the Helper, the Comforter, the Advocate. The Encourager, the Strengthener, would also be accurate translations. As you can guess, the reason there are still various translations is that no one of them is adequate; there is no single concept or word in English to capture the original term. The original King James translated it into "Comforter," which was a fine translation in 1611 but not a very good one today. (If you've been to a Shakespeare play lately you understand how much the language has changed in four centuries; "Comforter" used to mean "Strengthener" more than what it would mean today, something like "Consoler." Jesus knew the Spirit is more than "Consoler" to help us feel better when we're down—more like "Someone called in to help us be bold and strong.") "Advocate" was a specifically judicial term, which fits one of its original images back then also: in court, someone on trial was allowed to call in character witnesses in his support, and the accused was also entitled to call in a defense attorney. "Advocate" was used to define both these roles: someone called in to help someone in legal difficulty. The Greeks of the period also used this term generally to designate a "consultant"—an expert called in to shed light on some matter. Also this was a military term used to describe someone called in to rally and encourage troops who had grown discouraged. But you hear the common theme: this term referred in many different ways to *someone who was called in to help in a time of need or trouble*. [Barclay, p 167, John 2]

Jesus recognized His followers would otherwise be left discouraged and alone once He went to the cross and on to glory with the Father. So He promised to [have the Father] send the Holy Spirit to be with them and abide in them. To guide them, to remind them, to encourage them, to make them brave.

(The same Spirit is with us today. Jesus must think we're in a time of need or trouble. No—I don't mean tomorrow or the next six months in the life of our church: I think He means every one of us every day from now on!)

Although His disciples were slow to comprehend, Jesus understood the sending of Holy Spirit to be a necessary second phase of His divine Mission. This is what he was trying to explain to them. He came among us as a human being whom people could see and touch and hear in order to reveal to us the God beyond seeing and touching and hearing, and His purpose for us.

For a time Christ lived among us—but as He did, He was naturally bound by the particulars of human limitations: place, time, language, worldview, culture. He could live in only one place at a time, preach to one group at a time. In Christ, "The Word

became flesh” and moved into the human neighborhood [Eugene Peterson]—He came as a particular man, a Jew, Jesus, living in a particular place: first Nazareth, then Capernaum in Galilee.

Apart from the particularity of His becoming one man in one human body in one place, the reality of God would never have become part of our public history, available to human experience, the visible center of a visible community. [Newbigin, p 210] The mission of Jesus, the One sent from the Father, was to reveal God and His Kingdom and His love and His forgiveness to human beings. This is the upside to God’s plan: in Christ we have seen the face of God; “we have beheld His glory.” Without God having come among us uniquely in Christ, we humans would be limited either to private, “inner” experiences of God, or to the partial wisdom and enlightenment with which God has been revealed thru other wise and holy teachers.

But here’s the downside to God choosing to reveal Himself to humanity particularly in Christ: following His death our collective human memory of Him must inevitably begin to grow dim and fade into the past. Once Jesus left us, we could never experience the reality of God except second-hand thru the stories and memories and experiences of others.

Other religions wrestle with the symptoms of this same problem. There’s a reverential sadness which lingers around the shrines set up to memorialize other holy men and women of God, since the particular reminders of their having lived among us become very important to their disciples once they die. Time marches on and the gap, the distance, between the leaders and their followers can only increase. (I know some of you noticed this phenomenon in the Topkapi Palace and Museum in Istanbul: there, meticulously exhibited under glass, lie some of the particular mementoes of the prophet Mohammed: a pair of his sandals, a handwritten note from his pen, even whiskers from his beard.)

It did not occur to the disciples of Jesus to try to preserve His personal artifacts in the same way: they loved Him; they revered Him—but they recognized He was somehow present to them still. He is not a dead prophet who belongs to the past, but a risen Lord—and One whose Spirit lives among His people, still available to all people, even today in 2006.

The Church of Jesus Christ are not a people doomed always to be looking for our inspiration and energy into the rear-view mirror of history, to an ever-receding, ever-shrinking historical image locked into and buried in the historical past; instead, we are a people always looking with confidence and hope and boldness into the future because Jesus promised His Spirit would be with His people into the future, into all times and places. (On Pentecost, we celebrate the fact that He kept His promise.) “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” “I will be with you to the end of the age...” “I will send you another Helper just like Me...”

Jesus promised His Church He would send His Holy Spirit to be especially available to them, to us. I say “especially” because there has never been a time without the Holy Spirit, even before Creation. In the second verse of the entire Bible, there was the Spirit of God sweeping over the face of the waters covering the dark and formless void. The Spirit of God moved in King Saul and King David, and in the faithful prophets speaking the heart and the truth of God. The Spirit of God descended from the heavens in the form of a dove upon Jesus at the time of His Baptism; the Holy Spirit of God led

Jesus into the wilderness for the forty days preparation before He began His ministry. It was by the Holy Spirit that Jesus explained He could cast out demons and do signs of power upon the earth; Jesus anticipated and authorized His entire public ministry in that worship service in Nazareth: ‘the Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, and I have been anointed to preach good news to the poor...today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing: I am He; the One in whom the Spirit of the Lord is working.’ [Lk 4:18]

Nor is the Holy Spirit confined in His presence or influence. Peter explained “the Spirit has been poured out upon all flesh” [Acts 2:17]—not just Jews, not just Christians, not just men, not just adults, not just in Bible times. The Spirit of God is active in people all the time; preparing people to respond to the gospel; restraining the power of evil (can you imagine what this fallen world would be like were the Spirit of God to withdraw from us for even one day?); moving people away from the darkness and toward the light of God available to them according to where they are and what they know. The Spirit of God is motivating people to respect human life, to alleviate human suffering, to work toward peace. The Spirit of God moved King Cyrus in Persia; the Spirit of God swept thru Eastern Europe to bring down the Berlin Wall; the Spirit of God is speaking into the hearts and consciences of our friends and neighbors this very day.

You may have noticed, however, that the Spirit of God has not paraded forth thru human history unopposed, perfectly triumphant. You may have noticed that this world remains a fallen world. You may have noticed that the Holy Spirit has an uphill battle to fight even within this church, within our families, within you and me—and every day. (You may also have heard how the brilliant Catholic intellectual of a century ago, G.K. Chesterton, responded to an editorial contest run by the Times, the largest newspaper in London. The paper asked prominent authors to respond to the simple question, “What is wrong with the world?” Chesterton’s essay: “Dear Sirs: I am. Sincerely yours, G. K. Chesterton”)

This little problem of “what’s wrong with the world” lies behind the promise of Jesus we just heard: “If I go away, I will send the [Spirit] to be with you. And when He comes, He will prove the world wrong about sin, and righteousness, and judgment.” [16:8] (To some, these sound like empty church words and concepts—but I’m grateful that many of you have been hearing over the past month or two what is involved here: pride, repentance, the brokenness of this world, the reality of our sin, redemption from it. These are not random concepts, fillers, really nice ideas John decided arbitrarily to throw in at this point in the gospel because he didn’t want to delete them altogether.)

Here’s why sin, righteousness, judgment, are so important to the work of the Spirit. Apart from the Spirit of God, we humans will get it wrong about sin every single time. Jesus was put to death by the combined authority and by the “vote” of the people, the law, the state, the religious and civil leaders, the crowds. Clearly all of them—representing the varied voices of human opinion and human nature—judged Jesus to be guilty. They judged Him to be the sinner.

And it’s not just that human beings back then acted to judge and crucify the Lord Jesus, the spotless Lamb of God, the Judge—apart from the Holy Spirit, we still get it wrong every time. Here’s why: remember about pride. Left on our own, we already think we know about right and wrong. We humans keep thinking that sin is simply immorality. We resist the complete overhauling, the gutting the entire building, the teardown. We keep wanting to choose the merely cosmetic: maybe we should start going

to church more often; maybe I should give up smoking; maybe I should quit losing my temper. But I can manage it. We do not want to admit, “What’s wrong with the world? I am.”

We will get it wrong every time. We keep thinking sin is merely immorality, forgetting that Paul observed Jesus died for the ungodly—those standing eyeball to eyeball, clenched-fisted, deadset against God—not for the immoral. We forget that Jesus Himself insisted that those we call immoral—harlots and tax collectors (the most obvious examples of moral failure, like child molesters and heartless human “coyotes,” kidnapers and traffickers, in our day) enter into the Kingdom ahead of the righteous, the keepers of the outer law [Mt 21:31] Why are the immoral ahead of the moral? Because the immoral are likely actually to hear the gospel, to obey the Spirit—to *repent*—before the self-righteous, the proud, the religious ones! The religious ones, like most of our neighbors today, already know they’re right. They already know all about sin and judgment, and they’re not worried. We know better, and sometimes we still forget. (Heaven help us when we forget—and thanks be, the God of heaven does.)

Apart from the Spirit, we will get it wrong about sin every time. We believe sin is a result of social conditions: if we could just level the playing field, all would be fine. Maybe if we could just figure out how to tax enough to provide universal education and get everyone to get their high school proficiency degree and then thru college; maybe if we could hire more police and tougher judges; maybe if we could eliminate poverty and the real sources of crime; maybe if we could all just get along...Jesus reminds us that evil springs up from within the heart of the individual—we are defiled not by circumstances or by our economic poverty but by our human hearts. But Jesus also reminds us that wealth is a very great risk; that the rich and powerful can become jaundiced and heartless, and that political power often oppresses those without.

The Holy Spirit keeps reminding whomever will have ears to hear that sin is neither immorality nor social circumstance. Sin is separation from God; sin is pride; sin is unbelief and lack of trust in God. (When there is separation between God and me, it is not God who has turned His back or moved away!) Sin is not lack of education or lack of awareness or evolved consciousness; sin is turning our back on God, our hardness of heart toward God, our defiance of God, our disdain for God, our disobedience toward God. This is how we stay separated. The separation is not God’s choice!

We need the Holy Spirit of God with us, because otherwise we would remain unable to change or be changed. We would be left with the fond memories of a wonderful Lord named Jesus, a very wise man, one who preached about God like no one else; this man Jesus who lived long ago and who told great parables and did amazing miracles and other cool stuff. Even if we were left with the peculiar tradition insisting that Jesus was raised from the dead, never to die again—how could we possibly react to it all? What difference would it make? Maybe we would be left with a Bible, but how ever would it come alive for us; how could we see ourselves in Pilate, in Mary Magdalene, in Saul of Tarsus, in the woman who lost her coin or the prodigal son; how could we enter into its printed data on the page or trust our lives to what it says? How would we ever be persuaded that “I am what’s wrong with the world,” but Jesus has provided divine Help for me, help this very day?

Jesus understood what’s wrong with the world full well—better than anyone who ever lived. His mission in coming was to show us God’s way out of our human problem.

The second phase of the divine mission was sending His Holy Spirit among us to keep bringing us back to Him, to lead us and guide us in His Way.

Just here comes the fulfillment of the promise He had made them a few days before, to call in the divine Advocate, the Helper, the Encourager to help them—the Spirit was with them, with us, within us, His followers, His Church, forever. This is the high point of the entire gospel, and it passes by in a puff of smoke if we're not careful. Surely the Jewish hearers of this gospel knew what was meant—did you catch it? Just before He commanded them, "Receive the Holy Spirit," Jesus breathed on them. But this is no incidental detail.

This is John's account our feast of Pentecost. There He is, back alive among them, giving them their assignment, fulfilling His promise. Giving us all our God-assignment: "Just exactly as the Father has sent Me, I now send you." (More about that next Sunday.)

The Spirit of God, translated literally, was the Breath of God in both the Hebrew and Greek languages. The Breath of God brought life, as surely as you and I need to breathe to stay alive. Remember back in the Garden of Eden, according to the ancient story, God generated human life by breathing into a handful of dirt: "...then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." [Adam; Gen 2:7] A clump of dirt into a living, breathing human being—all and only by the Breath of God. [And Jesus already had explained to Nicodemus: you cannot enter into the Kingdom by thinking better thoughts or trying harder to be nice, or moral: "Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit." [John 3:5-6]

God created the original, biological human beings by breathing into the humus, the earth. Jesus generates a totally new creation, and creates new human beings fit for eternity, for knowing and loving Him and one another forever, by breathing the Breath of God into His followers.

Pentecost is more demanding than Christmas or Easter. At Christmas, the stage is Bethlehem, and while Mary does the labor God puts on the show. At Easter, the stage is the empty tomb, but God still puts on the show. At Pentecost, the stage is your life and mine; God sends the Spirit to us in order that the show go on in your life and in mine. We become co-producers; prompted by the Spirit, you and I become the stars of the show. (You and I become the third phase of the divine mission of God in the world.) Christmas and Easter are safely tucked away in the past. For most of us it's a lot easier to believe that God could pull off some amazing things in the past than that the Spirit of God is intending to pull off some amazing things thru us in the future.

Pentecost means that we, Christ's Church, are never left alone. The care and promise and provision of Jesus for His beloved followers surely extend to Corona del Mar and to every church where the Spirit is obeyed, today and tomorrow and a year from now and until Baby Morgan and Lauren and Simone and Kendall and Wes and Alex and Ella are great-grandparents like Jean Aldrich, and beyond.

That first Pentecost, Jesus kept His promise to send another Helper just like Himself to help us in time of trouble. He promised we'd be better off without Him. A lot

of folks were more comfortable when it was God putting on the show, which is about the same as telling Jesus He didn't know what He was saying or doing.

I am very grateful that you, this church, trust in our Lord Jesus. That you have willingly received the Breath of God. I am grateful that we will face the future not heartbroken and paralyzed over the absence of our Lord Jesus, not longing for the security of the past, but strong in the God-breathed Spirit to accept and to shape and to enter boldly into the future God has before us.

Thanks be to God.

**John, various:**

**14:25-27** "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. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

**16:6-11** But because I have said these things to you, 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. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

**20:19-23** When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."







