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“The Alongside God” GPPC 5-20-18  
Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 15:26-27 and 16:4-15

I preach this morning to give a word to the congregation, but especially to the confirmands who are joining the church.

No doubt you’ve noticed this already. When you travel, accommodations are one thing, but *who* you travel with and *why* you travel is even more important. Those of you who’ve been on a few mission trips, or youth mission trips or youth spiritual growth trips have probably noticed this. We suspect you did not stay at the Hilton Hotel. Your accommodations may have been “sparse” to put it nicely. But you most likely did not mind because of who you traveled with and why you traveled.

We’re on this journey traveling together, you and I, and all the world. We hurtle through space at thousands of miles an hour, spinning from season to season, and making our way around the sun, this seemingly ordinary star that’s part of one galaxy among billions of galaxies. We journey together, you and I, and all the world. And maybe we live many years or maybe we don’t. And we wonder “What does all

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this mean? Why am I here? Where do I fit into all of this? Where am I going? Where is the world going?” We’re on this journey together, you and I, and all the world. It matters who we travel with and why we travel.

Jesus journeys with his first disciples, of course. And in John’s gospel we hear him tell those disciples that he’s leaving. He knows, or at least suspects, he is going to die. And as you might expect, the disciples who’ve left family, jobs, and security and traveled with Jesus for three years, are confused and heartbroken. As Jesus says of them, “Sorrow has filled your hearts.”

But then Jesus also makes this strange comment to them (and to us). He says, “Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, because if I don’t go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”

Jesus says he needs to go so that he can send the Advocate to the disciples. What is this Advocate he talks about? The Greek word here is Paraclete. And I’ve always thought of the Paraclete or Advocate as simply another name for the Holy Spirit. But a professor says, “It is an

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oversimplification of this text to equate the Spirit of Truth, the [Advocate] with the Holy Spirit. The [Advocate] is the Holy Spirit in a special, personal role. The [Advocate] is the presence of Jesus when Jesus is absent.” (Judith M. McDaniel in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3, 21.*)

“The Holy Spirit in a special, personal role.” “The presence of Jesus when Jesus is absent.”

But what does this Paraclete or Advocate do? Here Jesus mentions at least two things.

The first is written in John’s typical complicated, winding style. Jesus says of the Advocate, “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.”

What in the world does this mean? In short it means that Jesus is vindicated. Those who opposed Jesus will be proved wrong about him. They said he was sinful and evil. And he was crucified because he

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deserved it. He was arrogant and self-deluded. He was just another schmuck with a Messiah complex. This was their judgment of Jesus.

But the Advocate will prove them wrong and prove Jesus right. Jesus sends the Advocate and his followers are given faith. And he continues even now to speak to people's hearts and minds and confirm what has been true and will always be true—Jesus is Lord.

Of course, the struggle to know and declare who Jesus is, as Jesus says “to testify” continues. There was a time when our culture gave tremendous support to the Christian faith. We call that time the era of Christendom, a sort of melding of the Christian faith and country. Businesses were closed on Sundays. Nothing much happened on Sundays, except church. On Monday morning, you might see the pastor's sermon in the newspaper. Kids learned the Ten Commandments in public schools. And so on. Some of this was good. Some of it wasn't.

But those days are gone. And the church and the Christian faith are moving to the margins as they were when the Christian faith first came into existence. This is not all good and it's not all bad either.

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But now there is open hostility to the Christian faith that we could not have imagined even thirty years ago. For example, I often read the *New York Times*, or the *Washington Post*, and other newspapers online, and I've noticed a shift in tone when it comes to the Christian faith. It used to be that the church and the faith were almost universally treated with at least a modicum of respect, or courtesy, or given fair critique, or maybe benign neglect. But now, whenever a column addresses issues about God or faith, or heaven forbid, Jesus, I click on reader responses and I can count on reading many snide comments that stereotype our faith as ignorant, racist, homophobic, and so on. "Well, what did you expect?" the commenters ask, "These are the same people who believe in gnomes, fairies, and unicorns." Or comments will proceed along the lines of "All religion is evil. It does nothing but create trauma and keep human beings in a babyish state of development."

But Jesus says when he goes he will send the Advocate who will vindicate who Jesus is and what he does. And in our age when the failures and foibles of the church, especially its leaders, are so prominent, doesn't the Advocate also call us to renew our emphasis on

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Christian education and Christian formation? Not only our children and youth, but we adults need to be prepared to testify, to speak of the faith in intelligent and winsome ways to a culture that more and more is suspicious and sometimes lumps all Christians into one backward, uneducated, unthinking, selfish cast. We need to be able to speak of the hope that is in us to a world that desperately needs the hope of God's love in Jesus Christ.

So it's encouraging to see classes for children and youth, youth mission trips (that are also occasions for spiritual formation and learning), confirmation classes, three adult Sunday school classes, two men's book studies, numerous Presbyterian Women studies, various book studies sponsored by our Justice and Peacemaking Committee, special speakers brought in to teach, and all of the learning church members and staff are doing on their own.

Are we not responding to the Advocate? And won't the Advocate call forth even more formation and learning in us to meet the growing need of a world that thirsts to hear the Christian faith taught in ways that are credible, intelligible, and attractive?

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The vindication of Christ and our testimony about Christ are important, but the Advocate also comes for another reason. On this Pentecost Sunday and Confirmation Sunday you see the Greek word for Advocate or Paraclete literally translates as “one called to the side of.”

(Thomas D. Stegman, SJ in *Feasting on the Gospels: John, Vol. 2, Chapters 10-21*, 191.)

Our God is the One we call to our side. Our God is the Alongside God.

Have you ever experienced that in your own life? Have you ever experienced a time when you called God to your side?

I have and I'll bet some of you have too. The Advocate, the Alongside God has come when you were worried about school or bullies or a loved one or a job or about yourself. There were times when you were grieving and the sadness would not lift. Times when you had made a mistake that hounded you with guilt. Times when you didn't even want to keep living. And in those times you called God to be at your side, and God came to you and gave you the strength, forgiveness, and courage to get through whatever you were facing. Have you known the Alongside God?

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And there were other times the Alongside God has come unbidden. Maybe when we were tempted to do wrong, to misuse our power, to denigrate another human being, to turn away from human need, to waste our lives in some destructive habit or relationship. And the Alongside God came and nudged us with the truth, and empowered us to choose what was right, even though it was hard.

Remember Jesus did not say, “Take up your pillow and follow me.” He said, “Take up your cross and follow me.” Sometimes following Jesus is hard, because love is not mere sentimental or romantic feelings. Love is to will what is best for others and love is action for others and love requires sacrifice. There is no such thing as love without sacrifice. You cannot love others without sacrifice. You cannot love God without sacrifice. Thoughts and prayers mean nothing without the change and work that love require. Love is costly. And the Alongside God comes and pushes us to love.

These confirmands make their public promises and public profession of faith today. Using the ancient words of the Apostles’ Creed, they are testifying to what they believe. The Alongside God will

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be there for them and for us when we call. And the Alongside God will be there to prod them and us along in this journey of life and faith. And the Alongside God will be there for them and us as we keep our promises to be active in the church, the Body of Christ.

It's one thing to travel; it's another thing to travel with God alongside us and to travel for God testifying to God's love with our lips and lives. God bless us as we journey in faith. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal