

Day of Pentecost Year B: 19/20 May 2018

St. James Episcopal Church, Clinton NY

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**It takes practice and resolve to dwell in God's word such that it
infuses our lives.**

Acts 2: 1-21

Romans 8:22-27

John 15: 26-27; 16:4b-15

Psalm 104: 25-35, 37

"When I drop my fears, when I open my heart to the Advocate, the courage to risk sharing my God experience becomes greater."

Early, last December, I was on the highway heading into Utica towards my doctor's office for what promised to be the culmination of three months' worth of testing and watching. I was journeying to hear the results of the biopsy that was done two weeks prior. As I was driving, I found myself reflecting on my feelings, or, to be honest, on the lack thereof, which seemed rather lamentable considering the possible prognosis I was facing. I was neither anxious nor sad. "Was I in denial or had I shut down emotionally?" I asked myself. I wasn't on the verge of tears nor was I feeling angry. I didn't know what I was feeling. As I pondered those thoughts, I began to pray a simple petition: God, grant me the courage and strength to face whatever outcome I must face, and give me fortitude to do what is necessary to find wellness and healing. I wasn't sure at the time what to make of what I thought was apathetically feeble prayer.

A few weeks later, I was sitting with the Bishop and sharing that story with her as I needed to inform her of my cancer diagnosis. Her reply to my concern over the perceived thinness of the prayer was simply to say: "You knew that God was standing with you no matter

what may come." She found beauty and sincerity in my words, and she was correct – I was at peace with the situation because I knew God was with me.

That's the reflection that came to my mind as I read today's gospel and found myself ruminating on the word "advocate." When the Advocate comes" is what John records Jesus as saying in his Gospel. Now I wouldn't blame folks for wondering what John is talking about since this reading is very much out of sequence. By that I mean, this reading *proceeds* the one on the vine and the branches that we heard just a few weeks ago. This discourse comes *before* Judas's betrayal as depicted in Ch.18, the crucifixion in Ch. 19, and finally the Resurrection in Ch. 20, where we hear of Jesus breathing the Spirit upon his disciples. Rather strange, I would say, to have this reading from Ch. 14 on the day the Church celebrates Pentecost, when according to John's gospel, the Pentecost moment happens six chapters later. What's going on?

In today's passage, Jesus is explaining to his followers what is to come and in what ways this Advocate will participate in their lives and the lives of the greater community. In other words, he's explaining the *purpose* of the Holy Spirit, where "spirit" is a different Greek word with a very different meaning than Advocate – they aren't interchangeable. The Greek word we translate as Advocate is *Paraklêtos* - Paraclete. That isn't the same word as *pnuma*, which translates breath/spirit. These words express unique ideas; related, but not the same. *Paraklêtos*, which is translated as advocate, counselor, or comforter, literally means "one called alongside." "When the one called alongside comes" is what Jesus is saying to his disciples. There is an intimacy being conveyed by using the word Advocate; one that's not just something that fills you, as breath does, but as one that accompanies you – companions you. And in the world that the Johannian community finds itself, knowing that, though Jesus is no longer physically present, he still dwells with them in a very intimate way is quite comforting and reassuring, to say the least.

Just as Jesus companioned them during his ministry, the Advocate, literally Jesus's presence, will companion them as they go forth proclaiming Jesus's message of love, a love that tears down walls of division and dismantles social barriers that foster separation. That's what the Spirit will do when it's defined as the Advocate, and the message is not lost on the Johannian community.

At the time of this gospel's writing, the author is extolling to the followers of Jesus who were at the time being excluded from established Judaism, that Jesus is still present among them. That no matter whether they're an oppressed Jewish sect for proclaiming Jesus as the messiah or for being outsiders coming into the fold of the Jesus movement, Jesus is empowering them through this gift of the Spirit. Jesus, is in fact, alongside them, come what may.

One of the overlooked truths of the Pentecost moment that gets lost in the cacophony of voices and various languages, is that of the gospel message overcoming differences of all kinds. The variety of people there that day, all heard Jesus' message of love. It's a story of radical acceptance that the world has tried to silence. In our current culture where its business as usual such that so many individuals are cast aside in the name of instant gratification, profit, greed, and privilege, Pentecost is the reminder that the Advocate is with us, alongside us, empowering us to give witness to this story of radical acceptance. But many of us hold back in sharing this message.

It isn't easy for many Christians, Episcopalians included, to talk openly about their spiritual lives and how God is at work in them. Yet, Pentecost reminds us that's exactly what we're called to do as an Easter people. We aren't to remain in our own little worlds of comfort and familiarity. Rather, we're to boldly share our faith, tell our stories of what God is doing in our lives. That's what it means to dwell in the word. Each of us has had a God experience. How wonderful it would be, if we were so filled with the Spirit that others would think we're drunk with zeal for sharing our faith. Alas, so many are reticence to do so, fearful of the consequences and perceptions of others.

I've no qualms about sharing my faith, of speaking of those times I've felt God sidle up beside me in whatever situation I find myself. That hasn't always been the case. I, too, have found myself holding back from time to time. It takes practice and resolve to dwell in God's word such that it infuses our lives. The disciples, on that fateful day, were so overwhelmed with the Spirit they couldn't contain themselves. When I drop *my* fears, when I open *my* heart to the Advocate, the courage to risk sharing my God experience becomes greater. That's why, on that drive into Utica in December, I found myself praying as I did, knowing that God was present with me regardless of the outcome I was to face. I knew in my heart that I wasn't facing the

future alone no matter the difficulties to come. That's, for me, what makes scripture the *living* word of God. It's in its ability to touch our lives, to make connections with our everyday being that allows us to recognize God's presence, not simply as words found on a page, but being alongside us infusing every part of our life. It is my prayer today, that the Advocate so infuse your lives with the Holy Spirit that you become drunk on God's abundant love such that you're willingly open to sharing those times God has been alongside you in your life's journey. In other words:

Where have you seen and experienced the Advocate in your life?