

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Psalms 66: 1-7
John 14:15-21

Faith Community
September 16, 2001

Introduction

Last Tuesday evening eighty people gathered here to respond to the tragedy of that day. This room was quiet, dark, and solemn. People from this church were here, people from other churches came, and some who had no church came; it didn't matter. We came horrified, fearful, upset, and in need.

Lots of us came to be with each other, but even more than that we came to be in the presence of God at this horrific moment in our history. We came with our anxiety to find comfort from God.

That is what we found.

For each of us there are times in our lives when we can sense the Spirit of God so clearly that it is palpable – we can almost reach out and touch it. Most people had that sense on Tuesday evening. In a time when we needed so much to find comfort and calm, the Spirit of God was here among us.

Some stayed in this worship area for quite a while after the service was over, continuing to pray and spend time surrounded by the Spirit of God. It was comforting and powerful.

I

As Jesus is about to leave his disciples forever, he makes a profound promise to them. He says, "I will not leave you orphaned." As he goes to face his death, he promises those who have faithfully followed him that he will not abandon them. "I will send you a comforter, I will give you my spirit."

But what is the Spirit Christ gives? How do we understand it? What is it like? How does it work? Jesus gives us images of what this spirit will be like, but not a clear definition. You and I often find ourselves at wit's end when we try to explain what a Holy Spirit is.

Scholars try to define the Spirit. They use ten-dollar words and complex theories to try to express it. Some have written thick books just trying to explain what the Holy Spirit is like and how it functions.

All that isn't helpful to most of us. But in another sense, we don't need all that information. At some point in almost all of our lives we have sensed the Spirit of God. In a moment of crisis or pain we have felt God's spirit with us, we have known we are not alone.

As a woman who is a member of this congregation faced surgery, she was very upset about it. I talked with her before she went into the hospital and she was visibly anxious about the procedure.

When I visited with her after her surgery she told me of the most wonderful experience. When the staff came to get her for surgery, she was at the height of her fear.

But as they wheeled her to the pre-op room she suddenly felt comfort, relaxation, and calm. She said to me, "I felt God with me in an incredible way. I felt God's arms around me as clearly as any human being's. I knew in that moment that I was going to be okay. My fear suddenly left me."

Not all of us feel God's spirit as clearly as she did, but most of us have had the sense that we are not alone, that God is with us.

So, in some sense, we don't need a lot of complex explanations of the Holy Spirit - we know it when we feel it.

II

When Jesus talks about the coming of the Spirit he is talking about a different form of God with us. Jesus of Nazareth is about to leave - his arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection will be happening soon - but he is going to send his spirit, the Holy Spirit of God, to be with those who trust in him. Jesus will be gone in physical, human form, but he will continue to be present with his followers in spiritual form. God came to us as a human being in Jesus of Nazareth.

Everyone could see him, no one could doubt that he existed; he was there before them in flesh and blood. Now God comes to us in a different form - as spirit.

This isn't as unusual as it may seem. Think of water, for example. You turn on the faucet and the water runs through your fingers. You wash your hands with it. No reasonable person would say that water didn't exist, we can see it and feel it.

Water can also take the form of steam or water vapor. Often vapor can't be seen; steam can't be seen at all. And yet they are very real. They are still H₂O - water - just in a different form. Water vapor often can't be seen; it can only be felt.

In one way, that is like the Holy Spirit of God. No longer is God present in human form, visible and tangible, now God's form can only be felt. Some will doubt its existence since it can't be seen, but everyone is capable of sensing its presence in their lives.

III

When tragedies strike, we turn to God, we call for God's spirit. "Don't leave us alone; give us your comfort."

That's what Christ promises his disciples at the end. He sees the coming tragedy and prepares them for life after he is gone. "I will not leave you orphaned, I will give you a comforter." The promise Christ made to his original disciples, he also makes to us, his contemporary disciples.

The word Jesus uses in Greek is transliterated "Paraclete." It is a word meaning comforter, advocate, champion, or counselor.

In Greek courts people were allowed to take a paraclete/counselor with them to court. The paraclete didn't plead their cases for them, but stood beside them to influence the court by their moral support for them and as witnesses to their value as citizens.

So in this sense the paraclete was an advocate for another, a comforter in their time of difficulty, their counselor and champion.

The word paraclete is derived from the verb meaning, "to call to one's side."

This gives us new insight into what God provides for us in the Holy Spirit. Not only is the Spirit one who comforts us, but also one who is at our side, advocating for us in our times of need. When we face times of difficulty the Spirit of God is there for us, and with us.

IV

But God's spirit isn't just there in times of tragedy and pain; the Spirit celebrates with us in joy as well. We turn to God in crises, in sorrow and pain, and we are so thankful in those tough times when we are able to sense God's presence in our lives. It gives us strength to go on.

But God's spirit is also with us to celebrate the moments of great joy. We cry out to God in thanks when the doctor reads the test results, and they are good. We can sense the spirit of God when one who was thought to be lost is found. We can feel God's presence when we gather to celebrate an anniversary.

God stands beside us in times of joy and sorrow, when we are delighted and when we are distraught, when we jump for joy, and when we writhe in pain.

We often turn to God immediately in times of trouble, reaching out for the Spirit of God. God is also there in our times of great joy and happiness. We can sense God's spirit in moments of delight as well as despair.

Conclusion

For many of us the Prayer Vigil Tuesday night was what we needed – to be at church, to be together, to pray, to hear the promises of God. What we hoped to sense there we felt – the Spirit of God. For some the Spirit was so clearly felt that we could almost reach out and touch it. We were comforted. We knew we were not alone.

Christ promised his disciples, us, that he would not leave us orphans. We thank God that in this time of our horrible need, God is keeping that promise.

Amen.