

The Anxious Season  
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First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
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## THE ANXIOUS SEASON

We might well call this time of year the anxious season. It is the anxious season because it is for many of us the season of change.

A Methodist minister once told me about the special anxiety that he and his family felt every year around this time. In those days Methodist ministers moved at least every four years, and so, when conference time rolled around, they knew that they would probably be going somewhere else.

Exactly where they would be going was not certain, but one thing was certain. They would be moving. May and June were anxious months for Methodist ministers. It was very hard on those families, always having to pack up and go to someplace new. Many of us here today know the anxiety of having to move. It can be quite a lonely and difficult experience.

This is also a season of anxiety because it is the season of graduations. Now, of course, there is great joy at graduation. Students are happy to complete their high school or college career. But, then comes the sixty-four dollar question, "What next?" A routine that seemed like it would never end is now over. Big decisions have to be made.

I love that TV commercial in which a young man is having difficulty waking up. He tells his roommate, "Oh, I'll just skip class today." But, the roommate insists, "You need to wake up and get dressed. You're not in college any more. You have a job, and you have to be there!" In the real world attendance is not "optional," and anxiety does not take a holiday.

In fact, in today's world the anxious season seems to last all year long for all of us. There are worries about war and terrorism and a faltering economy.

Where can we find peace in a world that knows no peace? That is the question asked and answered by our Scripture for today. Jesus talks about a peace that is not like the world's definition of peace. It is more than just the absence of conflict. It is the presence of God's Spirit.

## THE FEAR OF BEING ALONE

In this passage from John, Jesus talks about a fear that is behind many of our fears. It is the fear that this uncertain world will get the upper hand, and we will be left all alone to deal with a problem that is beyond our ability to manage.

Certainly the disciples feared this would happen in their own lives. Jesus in his "farewell discourse" had already told them that where he was going they couldn't follow. His way would be the way of the cross. Jesus would not be the political Messiah for which they longed. Jesus would be the suffering servant who took away the sins of the world.

Even more disturbing was Jesus' prediction that one of the disciples would betray him and one, namely Simon Peter, would deny him. In other words, this was a time of terrible anxiety and transition for the disciples. Jesus was leaving, and they didn't know where to turn or what to do.

Remember that line from the gospel song? "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child." That's how they felt. They felt like orphans because, at least in their minds, they were about to be abandoned by their spiritual father.

## THE PRESENCE OF GOD'S SPIRIT

But, Jesus assured them that though the situation would be grim and uncertain; he would not leave them alone. He would not leave them like orphans, without resources and without hope for the future. The disciples were given a precious promise. They would be filled with God's Spirit who would help them through the difficult times that they were about to face.

I don't care how experienced or strong you may be; there will be times in your life when you feel alone and abandoned. There will be times in your life when you feel like a lost child. Sometimes your heart will be troubled. Sometimes your heart will be filled with fear.

And at times like that, I think it is important for us to remember that the promise Jesus gave his disciples long ago still applies to us as well. We are God's children. And as such we have been given the promise that God's Spirit is always with us. We are not orphans in this world. We are never left alone to fend for ourselves.

## PARACLETE

I would like for us to consider this morning some specific ways that the Spirit of God helps us in our time of need when we're feeling all alone and helpless. I take as my guide the different ways that John's unique word for the Spirit, Paraclete, has been translated.

Literally the word, parakletos, means "called alongside of." So the Paraclete is the one called alongside of the disciples.

If you have different translations of the New Testament, you will see that almost all of them use a different word or phrase to translate this Greek word. Typical translations include Comforter (KJV), Helper (NAS), Advocate (NRS), Counselor (NIV) and Friend (Msg). I filled up my computer screen with different translations of this one verse!

James Somerville presents a unique illustration of the Paraclete. He wrote, When my wife puts her hand on the doorknob, her coat over her arm, my children look up from what they are doing to ask: "Who will take care of us?" and she gives them the name of one of their regular babysitters.

All of them are capable, and my children enjoy the attention, but if my wife gives them one name - - "Brittain" -- my children leap up from what they are doing and rejoice. Brittain reads to them, romps with them, acts out plays and makes chocolate chip cookies; she nurtures their young lives like a loving parent, and as long as she is with them they are not afraid.

I don't know that the Holy Spirit has ever been compared to a babysitter. But if you can imagine Jesus as a mother, then it may not be so hard to imagine the Spirit in this other role, as one who cares for the church in the interim between Jesus' departure and return, as one who comforts, teaches, reminds and, yes, sometimes even romps with the sons and daughters of God.

In the words of Jesus then, "Rejoice!"

So the Spirit can be defined in many ways, even as a babysitter! All of these ideas are possible and helpful.

But, as I considered them in the context of this particular passage, I found the work of the Spirit could be broken down into two basic categories. The Spirit is a Counselor, and the Spirit is a Teacher.

## COUNSELOR

Let's consider the role of Counselor first. Some of us when we have a problem that is too big for us to handle go to a counselor. Sometimes the counselor is a friend, a neighbor, a pastor, or perhaps a professional person like a psychologist or a psychiatrist.

That's good. All of us need to seek help from time to time. I would encourage all of you to take advantage of the help a counselor can offer.

But, all of those counselors, no matter how well meaning or well trained, have their limitations.

One of the warnings that we were given when we were being trained in counseling was to never play the role of Savior! We couldn't live up to those high expectations, and if we tried to do so, we would soon burn ourselves out. Our involvement in the life of the person we were trying to help needed to be limited because of our own limitations.

The same is true for all of us, whether we are professional counselors or not. There comes a time when we must realize our limits, even with those that we love the most. We can't protect them from everything nor can we be with them all the time. We must learn to turn over their lives and our lives to the care of God's Spirit.

I always remind myself when I do counseling that I am just the junior partner in that relationship and that I must entrust those in my care to God's Spirit as revealed in Jesus Christ. The Spirit is a Counselor with a capital "C." The Spirit understands what we cannot understand even about ourselves. I am reminded of what Paul said in his letter to the Romans, that when we are so devastated by trouble that we can't even pray, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us in "groans too deep for words."

Quite frankly, there are things that I do in this job as pastor that I couldn't do if I didn't believe this. If I didn't believe in the continuing care of God through His Spirit, I would run away from this job so fast you wouldn't believe it.

But, thank God I do believe this. I believe that it's not all up to us. I believe that the Spirit of God in Christ still comes to us. He is the Counselor who heals in ways that we cannot imagine and gives us hope in situations that seem beyond hope.

So, the Spirit is the Counselor.

TEACHER

But, the Spirit is more in our lives. The Spirit of God as revealed in Jesus Christ is also our teacher. You'll notice that this role is especially emphasized in our lesson for today. Jesus told his disciples that the Spirit would teach them all things and remind them of everything He had said to them.

Another reason that we find ourselves troubled and afraid is that we are often uncertain about what we should do next. So many choices face us each and every day. Which way should we turn? What should we do?

It is the Spirit who teaches us and encourages us to act upon that teaching.

After Jesus left them, the disciples were often uncertain about what they should do next too. If you read the book of Acts or the letters of Paul, you'll see that it was not always apparent what the next step should be for the Christian church.

At times it seemed like the faith was in danger of being destroyed completely.

But, God's Spirit always led them. And more than that, like a good teacher, God's Spirit changed them into greater people. The Spirit changed simple fishermen into eloquent spokesmen for the gospel. The Spirit changed fearful apostles into bold witnesses for the resurrection. The Spirit not only reminded the disciples of what Jesus said; the Spirit also gave the courage to live out those convictions.

The same promise holds true for us today. We need not worry what we should do next. When we read God's Word with believing hearts, God's Spirit will make the Word come alive. We will be taught not only the content of that Word but also to trust that Word to guide us.

#### THE DIFFERENCE A GUIDE MAKES

A preacher told of being on holiday in Europe and visiting a little German town. At the tourist office they were given a printed guide and then spent a frustrating couple of hours trying to find their way around the narrow, winding streets.

They often found themselves standing before a building and asking questions like, "Now is that the Grain Market or the Town Hall? No, I think that's the Guild Building."

But, that evening they had the good fortune of signing up for an evening walking tour of the town. An old man who had lived in the town all his life led it, and it was wonderful.

He took their small group through alleyways and into the kitchen of the town's oldest restaurant. He knocked on the door of the town's oldest house and pointed out things that they would have never seen if they had been out on their own even with the best guidebook in their hands.

The preacher concluded, "There is no substitute for walking the way with an experienced guide and teacher, someone who personally points the way...."

And that's what God's Spirit does for us. God's Spirit walks alongside us and teaches us. God's Spirit reminds us of what is really important.

#### LIFELONG LEARNING

All good teachers agree that learning is about much more than just the memorization of facts. Learning is a struggle to find the truth that sets us free. Learning is a commitment to discovery that lasts a lifetime. Learning is about beauty and emotion and personal growth. True learning affects the whole person.

In the same way, learning what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is more than just the memorization of the Apostle's Creed or being able to quote a few verses from the Bible. Learning to be a disciple of Christ is a process that takes a lifetime of teaching and involves our whole being.

And sometimes, when we who have been studying the Bible so long, think we've "got it," we are surprised by how much we have to learn. We are reminded of something by a familiar bit of Scripture that we had read a hundred times before. And yet this time the text seems to reach out and grab us and shake us. And we say to ourselves,

"I've read this so many times. Why didn't I see this before?"

That's the Spirit teaching us. That's the work of the Spirit, reminding us and helping us to become all we can be in Christ Jesus.

And at other times, we go through a tough time in our lives. The pain in our lives is so great that the world seems like a deep, deserted valley. We are so hurt that we don't know what to do or say. We even begin to question the goodness of God. We ask questions like,

"Where is God in all this? Does God care?"

And then the answer comes. Perhaps it comes in the words of a song, a prayer or even a sermon. But, you hear more than human words. You hear the word of the One who is a Counselor, the One who prays for you even when you're not on the prayer list.

And then you say to yourself, "Now I remember. My troubles almost made me forget, but now I know. I'm not alone. I'm a child of God."

That too is the work of the Spirit of God, bringing us comfort and counsel and hope.

#### A FAITH THAT REMEMBERS

There are some familiar words on our communion tables. Most of you know those words that are carved in capital letters. They are "IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME."

That summarizes not only the words that Jesus spoke at the Last Supper but it is also a description of what God's Spirit is doing through our worship here today. The Christian worship service is done in remembrance.

The reason we sing, the reason we read the Bible, and the reason we preach is to help us remember. It helps us remember who we are and whose we are. It helps us remember that there is one who walks with us no matter where we go and no matter how bad things get. No matter how much we know about the faith, all of us need frequent reminders of the promises and challenges that are ours in Christ Jesus.

That's why there is a certain amount of repetition in our worship service. This can be good because repetition reminds of what is important.

Every week we have a prayer of forgiveness because every week we have committed sin and need to remember that in the grace of God through Jesus Christ we are forgiven and freed to live a new way.

Every week we ask a pray for our needs because every week there are tragedies and needs that confront our community and world. We need to remember that God knows and God cares about what ails us.

Every week we hear the Word of God read and preached because we need to remember the promises of God.

I once preached a sermon entitled, "A Faith That Remembers for a World That Forgets." That's one of my all time favorite sermon titles because it summarizes so well the challenge that is before us.

We live in a world that seems intent on learning nothing from history. Even the churches want a worship service that is “modern” and filled with innovation and all of the latest technological gadgets. Like the Greeks of old we always want to learn about something new and improved.

But, maybe, at least when it comes to faith, we don’t need to hear about the new and improved. Maybe we need to appreciate the old. Maybe we need to hear something ancient, something familiar and something comforting as if we were hearing it for the very first time.

Perhaps what we need in the church is not innovation but repetition. Perhaps what we need is the guidance of the Spirit of Christ who gently reminds us and teaches us over and over again what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Are you troubled and afraid? Do you lack peace? Remember. You are not alone. There is a Counselor and a Teacher who can bring you a different kind of peace, a peace that changes this world and transcends this world, and a peace that passes all understanding.