

“We All Need Someone To Lean On”

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Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21:10,22-22:5; John 14:23-29

May 9, 2010 (Mother’s Day)

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen. The texts for our message are the readings for this day.

Have you ever noticed there is nothing but bad news when you watch the news even on Good Morning America? This week in particular it was just one bad thing after another: the banking crisis in Greece, rioting in the streets and a major downturn on Wall Street because of the serious implications for the rest of the European banking system. New York and the rest of the nation is still reeling from the Pakistani man with his home-made bomb in Times Square that made me think twice about going to the Mall of America. What will the cost of gas be after “the oil spill” that’s dumping millions of gallons of crude oil into the gulf coast? What damage will there be to the Gulf’s ecosystem? Oh, there is something you can do the newscaster informed me: have your dogs clipped and send the hair for clean-up. They will stuff the clippings into used panty hose and dropped into the oil spill where each pair sops up 50 gallons of oil. And, they are reusable; all you have to do is squish the oil out of them and drop them back into the ocean, hoping, I suppose that no one will think they are a dismembered body?

All that in 5 minutes on Thursday’s “not-so Good Morning America,” but all that bad news led me into the Good News for us in the lessons for this morning. There are all kinds of details we could look at from the first lesson from Acts, but the short version is this: the apostle Paul had a vision in the night of a man from Macedonia pleading for help (rather ironic as Macedonia is part of Greece and they are, once again pleading for help).

From that vision, being convinced it was from God, Himself, Paul and his companions, among them Luke, the author of Acts, set sail from Troas (near Troy) to Samothrace (an island in the Aegean Sea near Ephesus), Neapolis (the seaport of the city of Philippi) and finally to Philippi, itself. The point of this geography lesson from Acts is that after Jesus’ ascension and after St. Paul had his eyes opened by being blinded on the road to Damascus, the Spirit of God led the people of God into reaching out to others, no longer to Jews alone, but to Gentiles as well.

This was a huge paradigm shift that required a couple of divine visions to Peter and Paul and not a few church fights to make happen. And think of it – without this paradigm shift and the announcing of salvation for the whole world through faith in Jesus Christ we Gentiles would still be left out and shunned.

The problem, I suppose, was not sharing the Gospel but accepting these new believers as equals – partners in the Gospel. No longer unclean and vile but people to teach and then learn from – to lean on in times of trouble instead of just the people who had always known God’s Law and been part of the Old Covenant. What makes this lesson from Acts even more outrageous is that the new convert asking to be judged and then leaned upon is a WOMAN. Lydia, the seller of purple – an independent Greek businesswoman! Talk about a paradigm shift – they were learning to lean on the unlikely – those loved

by God and embraced into the family! Lydia is the hostess for the Apostles and the Home Church without mention of a husband. This was truly uncharted territory.

Not so radical for us knowing the command of Jesus to go into all the world and make disciples but this had never been the Hebrew way. They went into the world, made a living, and stayed to themselves hoping they wouldn't be killed for their belief in the One True God and enduring the scorn and persecution of all other nations and religions.

The scorn and persecution continued but these new followers of "The Way" (Jesus Christ – the ONLY way to heaven) were sent to the whole world leaving behind Bethlehem where it all began, Jerusalem, Judea, Galilee and going as far west as Rome (some say Paul went as far as Spain), through Thomas to India, and through Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch to Africa, where, incidentally, the Christian church is growing faster than anywhere else; already our African brothers and sisters from the Mykane Yesus have decided to send missionaries to the lost people of the United States – that's us! In all these places peoples of every nation, language, color and culture finding unity in Jesus – learning to lean on one another in the fellowship of the church through the power of the Holy Spirit.

None of that would have happened without the Spirit of God whom Jesus breathed upon His disciples and who exploded over Jerusalem on Pentecost and whom Jesus promised to send, as we read in today's Gospel—the Spirit of God, that mysterious, breathy, breezy personality that first "brooded over the waters" before creation began, that God breathed into Adam to make him a living soul, that takes water and the Word of God and by them both re-creates sinners into children of God and also meets us up there at the altar to assure us of salvation and forgiveness of sins as common wafer and wine become for us the body and blood of Jesus, shed for our forgiveness and for our eternal comfort.

All of that is "Spirit-stuff," wrapped up in Jesus' promise that when His followers no longer saw Him with their eyes, they would know Him by His Spirit - the Spirit whom He called the "paraclete," or "advocate." An "advocate" speaks for you or on your behalf. It's the combination of two Latin words, "ad" a preposition that means "to" or "toward" and the verb "voco" which means "to call," from which we get the word "voice." So, an advocate is your lawyer who tells you to keep still in court and let the lawyer do the talking. An advocate is your spouse who explains to a shocked dinner guest that you really aren't that strange – just your sense of humor. An advocate speaks for you when you cannot. All of those are good things and I suppose to be fair, they aptly describe how God's Spirit who comes to us through faith in Jesus, presents us before God, reminding Him, so to speak, that we are not only guilty sinners, but we are also forgiven saints and sisters and brothers of Jesus.

Still, that's not the word the Gospel used. It used "paraclete," which is a Greek word that means "to call alongside." Get the difference? An advocate stands in front of you, in your place; a Paraclete stands with you, as your partner one "called alongside" to represent you and do what is best for you.

Now there's a whole lot more to it than that—the church has argued for 2,000 years about God's Spirit and burned not a few at the stake as heretics for having a different point of view. This week I even came across the claim that somebody messed with the New Testament and that Jesus spoke only Aramaic and that the word He would have used for the promised Holy Spirit was either misheard or intentionally changed and that He was actually promising to send Mohammed, the prophet of Islam. That is quite a stretch.

But suppose we let Scripture alone do the talking here. Jesus said the Holy Spirit was to “come along side us” to “teach (us) everything and to remind (us) of all (He) has said to (us). Now that’s something we can work with. It’s also a good theological principle, not to over-reach and make theological claims that may or may not be accurate, but that cannot, given our knowledge this side of heaven, be positively demonstrated.

So, what does it mean that Jesus promised all of us that His Spirit would “come along side us?” He promised a partnership first of all as we lead our individual and corporate lives as His followers. We are not alone in making disciples to make disciples or in our living as disciples. We have God’s Spirit within us and among us. Do we have all the answers? No, we do not. But if we are patient and perseverant (neither of which is in abundant supply these days) God’s Spirit (it make take a life time or more) will teach us everything. Everything? Yes! Everything we need to know so that as we read in Revelation, we will arrive safely at the Heavenly Jerusalem.

God’s Spirit will “remind us” of what Jesus said and did among humankind. That’s why we read the Gospels. That’s why we teach the Scriptures—they are our story. They are full of people like us, with hopes and dreams and fears and faults who lean on God’s Word and Sacrament and lean upon one another just as those first shaky disciples learned to lean on their Lydia (and we lean on our Lydia Volz). They laughed like we laugh. They cried like we cry. They wondered as we wonder. And when we make a connection with one another in Word and Worship, in sorrow and in times of joy that is God’s Spirit “reminding us”—calling Jesus to our minds and hearts to comfort us, to challenge us and to encourage us. Because, after all, “we all need ‘Somebody to Lean On.’” That somebody is the Spirit, Jesus’ go-to guy who has come alongside us as we worship, witness and work in God’s kingdom, as we gather in fellowship with the winds of grace blowing fresh love and unity among us and wait and walk together on our way home to Jesus in the New Jerusalem!

Amen.

Now may our bountiful God, who gathers us into His realm of grace, nourish us through His Word and empower us by His Spirit that we may love one another and the world He came to save.