

The New Beginning

Jim and I had a busy week earlier in the month. We went to Texas to babysit our youngest grandchildren while their parents took a mini-vacation. Virginia will be three at the end of June and Thomas turned one in April. We watched them for two and a half days and two nights. Before she left, my daughter-in-law, Amy gave me 8 pages of instructions – what Virginia and Thomas eat for breakfast, lunch and dinner and who will eat what and who won't eat what. She wrote down where they like to go for walks, what time Thomas goes down for naps, what toys go in the bathtub, what time they go to bed and the individual and vitally necessary bedtime rituals. We did pretty well. Everyone slept and ate. We all had fun, lots of giggles, and only a few tears and a couple of tantrums.

8 pages of instructions – Amy knew she was going away.

When we go away leaving behind those near and dear to us, we want to be sure they will be taken care of.

Sometimes we go away and we don't leave 8 pages of instructions.

In 1992, I was sitting with my mother in her dining room and she was showing me her "treasures" – she had had a stroke that summer and since then she had been taking odds and ends of her possessions - things of little value like spoons and ash trays, barrettes and bobby pins– and wrapping

them in tissues or in towels, binding them up with rubber bands, and stashing them away for safe keeping. She was showing me where she had put some of these treasures in the dining room china cabinet when all of a sudden she stopped and put her hand on my arm and said, "Madeleine, take care of your sisters." The following Friday she had a massive stroke and spent the next three years in a coma.

A single sentence - Mom knew she was going away.

When we go away leaving behind those near and dear to us, we want to be sure they will be taken care of.

So it is with Jesus. He knows that his time with his disciples, with those near and dear to him, is short. He knows that when he came to the Jerusalem area, to Bethany and raised his friend Lazarus from the dead, the word would get out, people would be excited and the Jerusalem establishment would be paying attention to everything he does. He knows that when he enacted the prophecy and rode through the city gates on a donkey, the Jerusalem establishment would be threatened. He knows that when he went to the Temple and began to teach, the Jerusalem establishment would come and ask leading questions hoping he will say something, anything about which they can say, "Aha! Gotcha at last!" He knows.

The disciples continue to be clueless. They are like me when Mom put her hand on my arm. Like me they don't see Friday coming.

Today in our time we are after Easter but in Gospel time we are before Easter. It is still Thursday evening, during supper, before the garden, before the arrest, before the trial, before the Crucifixion. Jesus knows he will be leaving his friends, leaving those near and dear to him. He knows they will be taken care of. And he wants them to know they will be taken care of.

He doesn't give 8 pages of instructions or a single sentence. He gives them a promise.

He knows it is coming, the end of his time with them, time in the sense they comprehend, not time in the sense God comprehends. He knows they will be bereft and believe themselves to be abandoned. So he makes them a promise, a promise they won't understand until later – until Friday has come and gone and Saturday is a mere memory. He knows they will see Sunday, Easter, as a final word and regard it as an undoing of what has been done – and in some sense they will be right – but Easter does not mean a return to what was, but instead is a new beginning. It will be for them, for his friends, those near and dear, to share the new beginning his love brings into the world with each other and with the world. But they can't do it alone. And he will not physically be with them.

He promises them another Advocate. The Advocate will be with them always. Who is the Advocate he will ask the Father to send? The Greek word translated as advocate is Paraklete. No, a Paraklete is not a small bird with blue feathers. A Paraklete is a lawyer, a legal advocate; a Paraklete is one who pleads your case. An Advocate, a Paraklete is also the witness on your behalf. An Advocate gives you advice, speaks words of truth. An Advocate gives you strength in time of need - stands by you, no matter what, a comforter. And this Advocate is the Holy Spirit.

He knows they will need the Spirit; they will need the Advocate. The Spirit will do for them when he is no longer with them the things he has been doing for them while he has been with them. The Spirit will be with them always, not bound by space and time as Jesus himself has been.

Like Jesus the Spirit will give them comfort that will strengthen the disciples, not make them cozy, wrap them in a blanket saying, "There, there, it will be alright." The comfort the Advocate gives will buck his disciples up when times get hard, give them strength for the journey, courage along the way.

The Spirit will "strengthen them when they stand, raise them up when they fall, and comfort them when they are discouraged or sorrowful." Jesus knows this world will often make them discouraged or sorrowful. He knows that, after he is gone, Rome will still be there, and that they will be called traitors and atheists when they refuse to worship Caesar as God. They will need an Advocate. They will need the Spirit.

He knows, because he himself will cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" that his disciples will at times feel forsaken, abandoned, and unloved. They will need an Advocate. They will need the Spirit.

He knows they will be challenged by the establishment in Jerusalem. The Advocate will give them the words say. The Advocate will provide the courage to go on when they are imprisoned or tortured. The Advocate will be with them when they face death.

He knows they, for the sake of the Gospel, will be at odds with the society they live in. The Advocate will inspire them – inspire them to live into the commandment Jesus gave them – the new commandment to love as they are loved, and out of the love to share with others as God shares with them, to be neighbor to all, to care for the stranger. And the Advocate will remind them that forgiveness comes when they fail. The Advocate will call them into community and will be in them in love just as Jesus is in the Father and they are in Jesus. These are bonds of love that cannot be broken. These bonds of love will sustain them, will strengthen them.

Like the disciples, we face a world not always friendly, a world full of strife and conflicting allegiances, a world of pain and despair - a world of holocausts and tornados, of tsunamis and floods, of 9/11's and wars, of auto accidents and cancer, a world of unexplainable griefs and losses.

We ask, "Where is God?" "Why does God allow such things to happen?"

We too at times are discouraged and sorrowful, feel abandoned and unloved. We too need an Advocate. We too need the Spirit.

Good News!!! We share in his promise – we have the Advocate. We too have the Spirit. We may not be threatened by Rome, called atheists and traitors, but we are, at times and for the sake of the Gospel, at odds with the society we live in. We, like the disciples, are called to live into the commandment, to share with others as God shares with us, to be neighbor to all, to care for the stranger. We also, like Peter and John, Matthew and Andrew, are called into community, to be church, to love as we are loved.

And like them, we know that when we fail, and we will fail, the Advocate is with us to remind us that forgiveness comes.

Because in us also the Spirit is. Because the Spirit is in us, we share in the love into which the disciples were invited. We too are sustained by God's love for us and our love for each other. Because the Spirit is in us, we too share with each other and with the world the new beginning love brought into the world on Easter.

Amen.