

I Will Come to You

John 14:15-21

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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This week, I came across an article in *The New York Times* called “America Is Facing 5 Epic Crises All at Once.”¹ An ominous headline, to be sure.

According to the author, David Brooks, the five crises are as follows:

1. We are losing the fight against Covid-19
2. All Americans, but especially white Americans, are undergoing a rapid education on the burdens African-Americans carry every day. This education is continuing, but already public opinion is shifting with astonishing speed.
3. We’re in the middle of a political realignment. Divisions between left and right are getting wide and deeper and nobody seems to know what this will mean for November’s election.
4. Fourth, a quasi-religion is seeking control of America’s cultural institutions. Brooks calls this the religion of “Social Justice,” where “over the last half century, we’ve turned politics from a practical way to solve common problems into a cultural arena to display resentments.” (I think he could have used a better term here—who doesn’t want “social justice?”—but I digress)
5. Fifth, we could be on the verge of a prolonged economic depression.

It’s a fairly dire analysis of our present moment.

Now, it’s important to note that Canada is not America.

Canada has largely managed to contain COVID-19 in a way that the United States has not. We have our own history of racism in Canada that persists down to the present, but it is not as explosive as the reality south of the border at present.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/25/opinion/us-coronavirus-protests.html>

We have our own political challenges, and our discourse is dominated by similar ideological perspectives to our neighbours, but politics are not as nasty and polarized as theirs.

With respect to the last two, I would say that Canadian realities are very similar to American ones.

We, too, have an at times aggressive social justice movement that, while committed to noble goals of eliminating real social ills, can at times turn into a kind of incoherent rage and an eagerness to police speech and “cancel” anyone who transgresses ever shifting moral boundaries.

We, too, fall prey to the temptation to “perform” our morality and our grievances to gain affirmation from others instead of doing the hard and quiet work of striving for meaningful change.

And finally, Canada, too, could be on the verge of very difficult economic times.

Brooks summarizes our situation in this way:

These five changes, each reflecting a huge crisis and hitting all at once, have created a moral, spiritual and emotional disaster.

I don't know how that analysis sounds to you, but to me it rings true.

At times, it can feel like we have made a horrendous mess of things and we're helpless to find a way out of this collective disaster.

There's a word that Jesus uses in our reading this morning that comes close to capturing the sense of helplessness, loneliness, and despair that people feel during difficult times.

The word is “orphans.”

It is often commented that in a secular culture that can no longer believe in God, the vast universe can start to feel pretty lonely and human beings pretty insignificant.

But I don't think that these feelings are unique to nonbelievers. Christians feel lonely, afraid, and small, too. Christians experience sadness and pain and doubt and confusion, and unfulfilled hopes and dreams.

And even healthy Christians go through periods where it just seems like we're on our own here, like God is absent or silent or preoccupied or inattentive or.... something.

This experience of feeling orphaned in the universe is not unique to modern times, nor is it purely the one of the results of our modern scientific view of the world.

This morning's text comes to us from the Gospel of John.

We're picking up the story at the beginning of what biblical scholars call the "farewell discourse" of Jesus.

As you may know, half of John's gospel is devoted to the last week of Jesus' life, and a full four chapters (13-17) contains Jesus final words to his disciples before leaving them.

The disciples are confused, a little frightened, unsure of what is going to take place, not entirely sure what Jesus is talking about with strange words about "the Son of Man being glorified" and saying that they have seen the Father because they have seen him.

They are probably a little worried about what is going to become of them if Jesus ends up getting in trouble, they are probably feeling like small fish in a big pond, at the mercy of big and powerful forces beyond their control.

They're probably feeling a bit like orphans.

And in this context, in the middle of this long final discourse, Jesus says the words from our reading this morning. Words of comfort and promise.

I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you.

Jesus knew that his disciples would have times where they felt like orphans. He knew that they would face difficult times after he was gone.

These same disciples would face great hardship after Jesus was no longer with them bodily—persecution, suffering, marginalization, ridicule, contempt, and, in some cases, violent death.

Jesus knew that his disciples wouldn't always find it natural or easy to live with courage and hope. He knew that they would need a comforter and a helper—both of which are alternate translations of the Greek word translated “advocate.”

He knew that his followers would need help. He knew that the only way that we would be able to keep his commands, and love one another as we were made to do, would be if we were filled with his presence and energy and love.

And in this passage, Jesus promises that he will not leave his followers as orphans. He promises that the Holy Spirit will come and infuse them with what they need to do his work while he is gone.

Well, it's one thing to hear about the reality of the Holy Spirit, to hear that we are not left as orphans. It's another to experience it.

Most of us already believe that the Holy Spirit is within us, after all. But what difference does the Spirit make in our everyday lives?

A number of years ago, I had an experience that helped me understand this a bit better.

It was late spring of 2011 and we were just wrapping up our time in Nanaimo, BC before moving back to Alberta to take the position here at Lethbridge Mennonite Church.

One of the young adults at the church had been bugging me for a while to go surfing with him and the clock was ticking.

So, one Monday on my day off we packed up some gear and headed off to Tofino for my first surfing experience.

Well, I'm not sure you could actually call it surfing.

I was in the ocean. A surfboard was in the vicinity. There was a lot of paddling into the waves, drinking gallons of saltwater, and thrashing around helplessly. But I doubt a spectator would have called what I was doing for most of the day “surfing.”

At any rate, my young tutor for the day would stop me periodically throughout the day to analyze what I was doing (or failing to do) and to give me some pointers on how to get up.

At one point in the day, I was making minimal progress in at least picking the right waves and being pointed in the right direction when they crested, but I was still not able to get up.

“You’re trying to stand up too soon,” my young friend said. “You need to wait until you feel the wave start to move you, and then try to get up.”

“Right. Wait for the wave. Got it.”

I waited. I waited until I felt like the wave was on nearly on top of me, and then tried to stand. A couple of times, I actually made it!

Of course, I wasn’t up for long, but even surfing for 5 seconds is exhilarating!

I just needed to wait for the wave.

On the drive home that day, it occurred to me that there are some similarities between my experience on the surfboard and life with the Spirit.

In both cases, our job is to participate in what is already happening, to align our actions with a force and a momentum that is already at work, already in motion.

In neither case will it do any good to just do whatever we want. Just like I had to respect how the ocean works, we have to respect how the Holy Spirit works.

In both cases, we are to wait. Until the wave moves. Until God moves.

And then make sure you’re facing the right direction!

And what is that direction? Well, according to Jesus in this passage, love is the direction. We do what he commands. And what does he command?

Just a few verses earlier, Jesus says these words:

A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this, all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

How does Jesus love? Well, at the beginning of the meal in which Jesus says these words, he washed his disciples’ feet.

We love selflessly. Sacrificially. Humbly. Putting the needs of others ahead of our own.

We keep doing this, over and over again, we keep facing the direction of love, and eventually...

We stand up.

We recognize the Spirit’s movement in our lives. We see how our actions and our words are increasingly fitting with the life and character of Jesus.

And in the process, we become agents of meaningful change in our world.

I don’t think there is one of the five crises that I referred to earlier that cannot be improved by people who are consistently and persistently facing in love’s direction, in obedience to the Spirit’s leading and to the purposes of God.

Love in and of itself won’t eliminate COVID-19, but it will help us live with and take care of one another better in the midst of it.

Love can heal racial divisions and train us to treat all human beings as image-bearers of God.

Love can motivate us to pursue social justice not as something we perform to gain social credit, but as God’s vision for a world where all have enough, and all are treated with fairness and compassion.

Love can turn our politics into something that actually brings stability and security and possibility into people’s lives, instead of an ugly spectacle that brings out the worst of our tribalistic instincts.

Love might not be able to reroute the economy, but again, it can certainly help us to navigate the challenges ahead with kindness, compassion, and concern for those most likely to be hurt by hard times.

We are living in a difficult moment. It's easy to feel alone, helpless, confused, even abandoned by God.

Our passage this morning grounds us once again in the most basic truth of the Christian life. It urges us to love as Jesus loves—to always be facing the right direction.

It urges us to take heart because the Spirit of Truth is within us in the process, shaping and molding us, comforting us, encouraging us, cheering us on as we pursue righteousness, as we seek to be faithful in a time of crisis.

I will not leave you as orphans. This is Jesus' promise to us, and it is true regardless of what's going on in the world or in our lives.

I don't know where you are at this morning. Perhaps you are feeling close to God, you are walking with the Spirit with joy and enthusiasm and peace. Perhaps you are feeling like the world is a source of wonder, delight, and security.

If so, praise God!

But perhaps there are others here who are feeling somewhat orphaned. Like there is no one to protect you, like there is no one to comfort you, to cheer you on. Like you are alone and afraid, and uncertain. Like life is throwing more at you than you can possibly handle.

(And let's be honest, *many* of us are feeling that way in 2020!)

If so, I hope that Jesus' words can be a lifeline for you today.

The world can be scary, it can be confusing, it can be disorienting and painful, and frustrating. But the Holy Spirit of Truth is here.

Just like the waves that ceaselessly roll toward the shores, the Spirit is always at work, even when it doesn't seem obvious.

Our job is to recognize this, to acknowledge it, yes, but also to be facing in the right direction, and moving with the Spirit in our everyday lives.

If we are sensitive to the Spirit's presence, if we are honestly and openly living lives of love and trust before God, the comfort of God will be with us, and we will know, deep in our bones, that we are not orphans, that there is a God out there who has given us life and love to guide us at all times.

And, most importantly, we will be reminded that God has *not* abandoned the world. He has not abandoned you. He has not abandoned me. He has not abandoned our church. He comes to us still.

For all these things we say, "Thanks be to God."

Amen.

