

Text: John 16: 7-15  
Title: Paraclete Present Progressive  
Date: 05.30.10  
Roger Allen Nelson

*Here it is; my last gasp before a sabbatical. Out with a whimper and not a bang, because almost eight years and approximately 350 sermons later ~ this is all I've got.*

We say it all the time, "May God be with you..."

We pray it all the time, "Dear God be with our children..."

be with the doctors....

be with our loved ones as they travel....

be with our leaders...

be with our pastor on sabbatical..."

We long for it all the time, "God be present to heal,

or save,

or soften,

or lead."

We want ~ often desperately ~ for God to be present.

When a young couple marries,

when we get the pathology report from the doctor,

when we stand with the grieving,

when we baptize a baby....

For Cody Ryan we want God to be present as he grows and stretches and runs and stumbles and so...we say, we pray, we long for and we want God to present in some way that is tactile, tangible, and real.

Do you know what I mean?

Have you ever prayed for, longed for, and wanted God to be present?

Have you ever desperately wanted God to be more here than there,

more now than then,

more present than absent?

There is a wonderful, beautifully written, passage in a novel by Frederick Buechner where a man stretches out in the grass near his father's barn. He closes his eyes, feels his life, and finally whispers, "Please...." He reaches his hands up into sky and whispers, "Please, please..." He is aware that he is not praying for others; he is praying for himself. Then, "Please come... Jesus."

And then, Buechner writes:

*Two apple branches struck against each other with the limber clack of wood on wood. That was all—a tick-tock rattle of branches—but then a fierce lurch of excitement at what was only daybreak, only the smell of summer coming, only starting back again for home, but oh Jesus, he thought, with a great lump in his throat and a crazy grin, it was an agony of gladness and beauty falling wild and soft like rain. Just clack-clack, but praise*

*him, he thought. Praise him. Maybe all his journeying, he thought, had been only to bring him here to hear two branches hit each other twice like that, to see nothing cross the threshold but to see the threshold, to hear the dry clack-clack of the world's tongue at the approach of the approach of splendor.*

Maybe that is all we get. We pray for, long for, and want God to be present and all we ever experience is the threshold, the approach of the approach of splendor. Again in Buechner's words:

*The occasional, obscure glimmering through of grace. The muffled presence of the holy. The images, always broken, partial, ambiguous, of Christ.*

Have you ever prayed for, longed for, and wanted God to be present?

Our text this morning is about the presence of God. The Gospel of John records this long last discourse of Jesus. It runs for 3 or 4 chapters, depending on how you count; it is dense and multilayered and laced with prayer ~ Jesus praying to his Father. And, it is one of the places in scripture where the image and imagination of the Trinity is most clearly seen. Jesus talks in this section about his Father and the Spirit as distinct persons, who can be distinguished but not separated....

And, in the middle of all of that Jesus tells his disciples that he is leaving so that the Spirit will come. There is a kind of divine dance. Jesus steps out so the Spirit can step in.

The word for the Spirit here is *paraclete*. In Greek "para" means "to the side of" and "clete" means "called." A *paraclete* is one called to your side. In first century Palestine *paraclete* was often used as a legal term ~ it suggests a defense attorney who comes to your side and advocates for you. So, the word is translated, depending on your translation, as Advocate, Counselor, Helper, Comforter, or Encourager.

The *paraclete* is God beside you. God there to strengthen, encourage, comfort, and counsel you. God in us and God near us. God present with us.

And, maybe it is as simple as that.

Jesus leaves, the Spirit comes, and in the mystery of the Trinity the presence of God that we pray for is the *paraclete*. Not just God at the threshold, but God across the threshold and called to our sides.

I ran a 10 mile race yesterday. With over 8,000 of my closest friends I ran along the lake shore and finished on the fifty yard line of Soldier Field. Toward the end of the race I passed a father and daughter. With every few steps he said something to her:

*Come on, you can do it. Only two more miles to go.....  
You're doing great. Just keep it up. Only 15 more minutes.  
Good job.... Come on.*

I have no idea if it was as annoying to her as it was to me, but I am sure that he saw himself as an encourager. He was alongside her, encouraging her every step of the way.

We easily understand the role of the Spirit as God coming alongside us to encourage and keep us moving forward. Sometimes this world is so broken and brutal that it is tempting to pull over to the side of the road, sit down, and call it quits. But, the Spirit sustains and draws us forward.

After my father was murdered the only way that my mom was able to talk about God's presence in her life was some mysterious undergirding that enabled her to keep going. Thomas Dorsey wrote about it this way:

*Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, help me stand.  
I am tired. I am weary. I am worn.  
Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light.  
Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me home.*

Dear friends, even on this morning ~ when all we often know is the clack of apple branches ~ can we affirm and proclaim that God is present as *paraclete*: God alongside us.

And, no matter what where you are this morning,  
no matter what struggle or what song,  
no matter how lonely or lost,  
no matter how weary or worn, God is present.

The Heidelberg Catechism summarizes it this way:

*What do you believe concerning "the Holy Spirit"?*

*First, he, as well as the Father and the Son, is eternal God.  
Second, he has been given to me personally, so that by true faith, he makes me share in Christ and all his blessings, comforts me and remains with me forever.*

That is a powerful and helpful encouragement, but it easily relegates God to cheerleader and chum. It diminishes God as our BFF (Best Friend Forever).

Our text this morning also names the role of the *paraclete* as that Spirit of truth who will guide us into truth. The Spirit will lead to the truth about sin and about righteousness. The Spirit's leading is not willy-nilly, directed by whim or wind. The Spirit will lead into that dance between Father and Son and the wellspring of all truth.

Now, my Greek is exceptionally rusty, but most of the verbs in this passage describing the activity of the *paraclete* have a future active sense. This is work that is happening in the present and will continue to happen in the future. This is leading that is now and that will be ongoing. The *paraclete* is God present progressive.

And, here is the nut of it for me this morning.....

As that is true, I would offer that the Spirit of God has a progressive, evolutionary, quality. The Spirit leads us into new, wider, and deeper understandings of God ~ of truth. That is not to suggest that humanity is necessarily getting better (depravity is still the only doctrine for which I have irrefutable proof), but it is to say that truth is not singularly fixed.

Can we say, for example, that the Spirit has led us into truth about slavery, or cosmology, or a complementary co-equal understanding of gender and gifts? Can we say, for example, that the Spirit has led into new ways of understanding the atonement, or homosexuality, or relationships between other peoples, cultures, and faiths?

Or, is truth something that is staid, stuck, and static and the only function of the Spirit is directing us to and dusting off fixed truths?

If the *paraclete* is God present, is that leading limited to what we do as individuals or is there a collective, continuing, evolving, unfolding quality to the way in which the Spirit would lead us? Is everything revealed, static, and done or is the Spirit alive, advocating, comforting, encouraging, comforting, leading?

Have you ever prayed for, longed for, and wanted God to be present?

The good news is that before we sought God, before we even knew anything about it, God was seeking us in Christ and in turn sent the *paraclete* ~ God alongside us.

So, this morning we sign and seal that God has claimed Cody Ryan and will never let him go. And, we celebrate, that in the mystery of the Trinity, God is present with us ~ even today.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.