

Worship – May 17, 2020

PREPARATION FOR WORSHIP

CALL TO WORSHIP

Jesus, you promise us the gift of your Holy Spirit; we yearn for the spiritual ... Come, Holy Spirit, come! Jesus, you promise us an Advocate to guide us in the truth of your love.

We seek your presence and wisdom in this life ... Come, Holy Spirit, come!

Jesus, make yourself known to us and keep us alert to your unexpected revelations.

We hunger to abide in your love, it is there your will is revealed ... Come Holy Spirit, come!

A BRIEF CONFESSION

In the surety of the Risen Christ, we are confident to make our confession to God.

Lord of Life, hear the prayers of your people.

In the surety of the Risen Christ, we confess our failures and brokenness.

Lord of Life, forgive and heal your people.

In the surety of the Risen Christ, we seek God's mercy and compassion.

Lord of Life, renew for service, we your people.

God forgives, heals, and renews us for blessing in the world. Amen.

GREETING

The Lord be with you

And also with you.

May the spirit of God's presence and love embrace us in this time of worship today.

Come Holy Spirit, come!

SCRIPTURE READINGS

1st reading – Acts 17: 22-28

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring."

2nd reading – Psalm 66:8-9, 16-20

*Bless our God, O peoples,
let the sound of his praise be heard,
who has kept us among the living,
and has not let our feet slip.
Come and hear, all you who fear God,*

*and I will tell what he has done for me.
I cried aloud to him,
and he was extolled with my tongue.
If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened.
But truly God has listened;
he has given heed to the words of my prayer.
Blessed be God,
because he has not rejected my prayer
or removed his steadfast love from me.*

Gospel reading – John 14: 15-21

'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'

SERMON

<https://youtu.be/TXtmmF8INuA>

Easter 6

ALONE ... NEVER

May 17, 2020

John 14:15-21

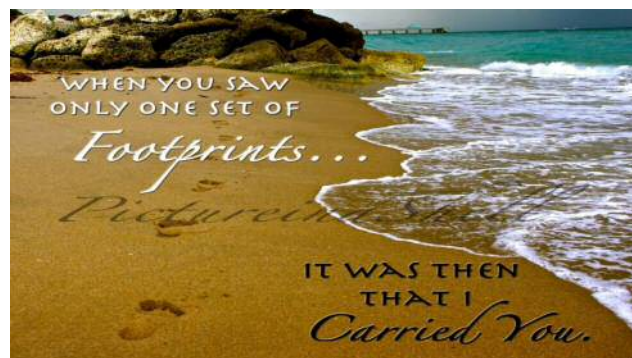
Most all of us have

heard the poem and seen it inscribed on a card or painting with the image of a sandy seashore

scene ... I'm talking about the poem "Footprints" where a man in a dream reflects on his life and notices two sets of footprints in the sand, one set is his and the other set of prints is God's.

The man notices that in the most difficult times in his life there is only one set of prints in the sand and asks God why God did not accompany him in those difficult times. God's reply ... *It was then that I carried you.*

You've probably seen something like this:



This is a poem about God's presence

in our lives and how we sometimes feel that God is absent,
 that God has abandoned us,
 that God was not there when we needed God most.

Although this poem is a statement

of faith expressing the presence of God even when we can't feel or perceive that
 presence, is also a poem that expresses our fear of being left alone.

It was a startling idea to me

to learn that astronomers have proven that the universe is expanding ... what that means

is that the galaxies of the universe are ever moving farther away from us.

Using a measurement guide

called the Hubble Constant, the further out away from the Earth you go, the pieces of the universe are travelling ever faster away from us.

For example, if you go to 30 million light years away from earth, you've got the pieces of the
 universe moving away from us at about 500 miles per second; go 10 times further to 300
 million light years away, then the pieces move away at a speed of 4,350 miles per second.

The point is, though there may be life

elsewhere in the universe ... the point is that every second it's getting farther and farther
 away from us – **that's a very lonely thought.**

It resonates with this photo of our planet

taken in 1990 by the Voyager 1 space probe shot from a distance of about 3.7 billion miles
 away from Earth.



Screen 2

We are small (barely detectable) even in our own solar system,
 let alone the universe – it makes me feel alone.

We human beings don't fare so well in loneliness.

We are social by nature ... seems God created us that way.

While some of us like a bit of solitude now and again and while some of us are

extroverts and others introverts ... most of us don't want to live alone all the time.

It is said that elderly people who maintain social connections are happier & live longer.

We don't like being alone.

Evolutionary psychologists say that human beings have learned over millions of years

that our survival as a species is enhanced in community ... that a solitary lifestyle makes us more prone to depression, mental illness, and deprives us of resources for survival.

Add to that, being in

some sort of distress, feeling vulnerable, or being in the midst of some trauma or crisis ... in

these kinds of times, the sense of being alone strikes even a deeper chord of anxiety.

That's where the disciples are in the reading we hear today

from John's 14th chapter ... actually, what we hear is a continuation of last week's reading

where at the beginning of this 14th chapter, Jesus says to the disciples – *Do not let your hearts be troubled.*

Today we hear Jesus

assuring the disciples that he will not leave them orphaned, in other words, he will not leave them alone

Orphaned ... what a heart wrenching and poignant way



to describe the disciples emotional state at the prospect of Jesus leaving them after their following him for three years and giving-up a lot in order to do that.

They were despondent, at the point

of losing it ... Jesus, their Teacher & Lord was ending his ministry tragically in the disgrace of execution & death.

This word *orphaned* paints the picture that the disciples were like **little children who's dad was suddenly** hauled-off by the police, thrown in prison, and ordered to be killed the next day.

Orphans in biblical times were among a class of people to be most pitied, their plight was dreadful, **their future prospects grim ... they had no one, they were alone.**

In Jesus using this word “orphaned” ... the disciples understand

that Jesus understands **the depth of their distress ... and so Jesus says to them: t**

I will not leave you orphaned ... he address their fear of being left alone.

Jesus begins this “counseling” session with the disciples by promising them

an “Advocate” (John 14:16) ... other translations refer to this Advocate as *a Helper, Comforter, Advisor, Counselor*

In the original language of the New Testament this word bears the sense that

this Advocate, this Helper is one who is “close beside” us ... **in other words, Jesus promises** the disciples (and us) that we **are never alone ... that God's Spirit accompanies us and is always close beside ... we are not alone.**

I like that, “close beside” ... **like adult and child walking side by side together,** like a couple walking hand in hand together, like someone helping an elder up the stairs or to step off the curb, like a parent running alongside a child on that 1st bicycle ride.



CLOSE BESIDE is Jesus' promise ... we are never alone.

Alice was facing a very serious surgery ... the church

I was serving at the time was like Bethany, in that we had a Prayer Chain and a published prayer list in the weekly bulletin and newsletter.

I visited with Alice

many times prior to this upcoming surgery, I prayed with her every time I visited, and she knew that many others were praying for her as well.

And in the course of those visits

Alice expressed her sincere thanks for the prayers, that they meant a lot to her, but she also **expressed that though she felt her faith community's support** – no one could go through this surgery for her, she had to do it alone.

And in that “aleness” she said

she was scared... *“It’s like the crowd is cheering you on, she said, to run the race ... but no one can run it for you, when the starting gun goes off, you have to run it alone.”*

It’s that kind of “aleness” that Jesus addresses in what we read

in John’s 14th chapter ... that “existential aleness” as the philosophers call it, that aleness every one of us knows exists at both the beginning & ending of life.

**No one can be born for you
&
And no one can go through your physical death for you
We are alone in those “bookends” of life.**

So, Alice says to me

the day before her surgery ... she says: *“I’ve been praying (as are many others) ... praying a lot about this surgery and maybe the answer to these prayers more than whatever outcome prevails (she says) maybe the answer to the prayers is that I don’t feel alone somehow.”*

I didn’t want to “quiz” her on that feeling so that I

could understand what she meant ... something told me that God’s Spirit was at work here in that “close beside” kind of way ... where she felt the comfort & help of God to be very close by – I didn’t want to mess with that.

Consider the loneliness factor in these days of COVID-19:

The call for people all over the world is to avoid social interaction and to hunker down in our homes.

Large gatherings, sporting events, worship services, and the like are all on hold. Wearing a mask to protect others and ourselves creates a visual anonymity that somehow makes us feel alone even when we do go out for those essentials.

In these days of COVID-19,
the human loneliness factor is
heightened all the more.

The add we see on television, *“We are all in this together”* while true enough, seems not to reduce that feeling of isolation because everything we do is geared at avoiding, or at best, reducing human contact.

Think of the people in intensive care units on a respirator ... no family allowed,
people in hospitals with no visitors allowed,
people self-**quarantining because they’ve been exposed to infection,**
people in care facilities looking out the window at loved ones.

In these days of COVID-19,
the human loneliness factor is
heightened all the more.

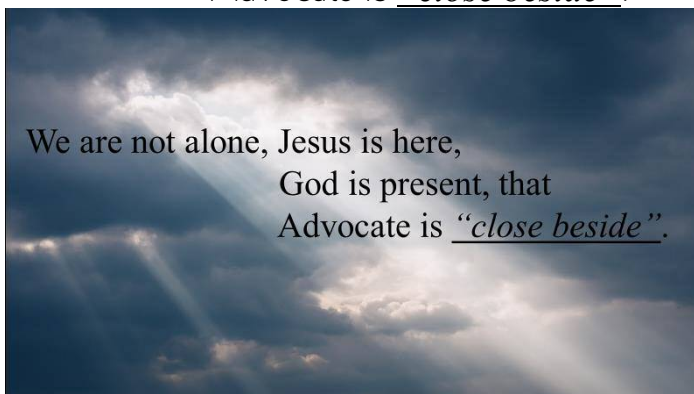
But what we hear today from Jesus and what we

can learn from Alice’s experience is that we are not alone, no matter the circumstances
that makes us feel that way.

Jesus promises to be “close beside” ... **that Advocate,**
that Helper is “close beside” we are not alone, ever.

From our birth to that last breath we take

and beyond ... we are not alone, Jesus is here,
God is present, that
Advocate is “close beside”.



AMEN

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

In the beginning the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters. We believe God to be the Creator of all that exists and who made us in the image of the divine. We believe the Spirit of God still sweeps over the earth and all creation creating life anew every day.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. We believe that at the proper time God called Jesus to be the light of the world. His life and ministry, his death and resurrection is the Word of God in action bringing to us compassion and mercy, healing and grace.

In the beginning the Spirit of God, bursting with creativity and energy, brought forth life. We believe this same Spirit gives us a creative energy to be the light of Jesus in the world. AMEN.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Ever present God, assure us through the gift of your spirit, The Helper, that we are never alone. Fill us with the peace, the strength, and love that your constant presence gives us. Help us always, in how we live and through the words we say, to be a window pane through which another can glimpse your presence in their lives. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Ever present God, we pray for a world caught in the grip of sickness and fear in a time of pandemic. We pray for a world where violence and war rages because of hatred and the thirst for power. We pray for a world where many are in need of food, clothing, and shelter. Use us to bring healing, to bring peace, and to be providers whereby your presence is felt and heals. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Ever present God, we bring before you all who are on the Bethany prayer list. We pray for all medical personnel and essential workers. We pray for leaders of cities, states, and for leaders of countries to work together in ways that can bring peace, provision, and healing. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Ever present God, we pray for our church, the faith community called Bethany. Strengthen us in this time of social distancing. Help us to know with all certainty this family of faith is as united as ever. Be with our Grand Canyon Synod, the Bishop and staff as they seek to be our partners in prayer and presence through this pandemic. Be with all faith communities as they, like us, wrestle with how to be church in these difficult times. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Ever present God, we come before you now in a moment of silent prayer (Following your silent prayer say: Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.)

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Hear us now as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray:

(You may say the traditional Lord's Prayer or the Aramaic version printed below.)

O Creator, the one who gave birth to the universe, You are the sacred source of our being.

*Focus Your ways, Your light, within us, make us useful for Your purposes here on earth so that
Your desire and our lives become one.*

Grant what we need each day in bread and insight.

Loosen the cords of mistakes binding us, as we release the strands we hold of other's guilt.

*Do not let surface things delude us, snare us, and lead us away from You and Your purpose.
But free us from what holds us back, give us power to live as you intended and created us to live.*

*From You comes the all-working will, the lively strength to act,
the song that beautifies all and renews itself from age to age. AMEN*

OFFERING *(Please mail your weekly offering to the church.
4300 N 82nd St. Scottsdale, AZ 85251)*

PRAYER OF BLESSING

Good and gracious God, you are the source of all blessing. In generosity, you provide all we need for the living of our lives. We, in turn, are called to be generous ourselves. We pray that what we give be used as an expression of your presence and healing in the world. We thank you for this opportunity to give back something of the blessings we have received from your hand. AMEN.

BENEDICTION

*May the beauty of God
be reflected in your eyes,
the love of God
be reflected in your hands,
the wisdom of God
be reflected in your words,
and the knowledge of God
flow from your heart.*

DISMISSAL

In the power of the Holy Spirit assuring you of God's constant presence; go to be the light of Jesus in the world. Thanks be to God.