

Easter 7 Sermon
The Rev. Megan Dembi

In order to understand what is happening in the Acts reading today, we need to go back in time a bit—back to Holy Week—the last week that Christ walked the earth in his mortal flesh. On Thursday in Holy Week, Christ reminded the apostles that he was going to die, and informed them that he had been betrayed by one of his own. But he also left them with these words of comfort. Christ assured them that even when he was no longer with them, the disciples would not be left alone. After reminding them of his teachings, Jesus tells the apostles, “I have told you this while I’m still with you. However, the helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything. He will remind you of everything that I have ever told you.” Though the Holy Spirit had been at work before the beginning of creation, Christ was promising that it would interact with believers in a new way—because the Holy Spirit would help serve as a guide and a reminder of Christ’s teachings.

The next day, Christ was put to death by crucifixion. Yet on the third day he was resurrected, as Mary Magdalene witnessed. Christ would then continue to reveal himself to his disciples in his resurrected form until the Ascension, helping guide them as they struggled to spread the Gospel after his death. But as Christ had foretold, he would soon leave them once again—ascending into heaven to be seated at the right hand of the father. But he would not leave them comfortless, as the Holy Spirit would soon be with them in a new way.

This brings us to the Acts reading today. In spite of all that Christ had taught them, the apostles still believed that Jesus would be ushering in God’s kingdom within their lifetime. Yet Jesus once again tells them that no one knows when this event will take place, but that the Holy Spirit would aid the followers of Christ in the meantime. As he had just finished telling them this, Christ was lifted up into heaven, where he would return to the Father. And the apostles were left to await the promised Holy Spirit.

This was a difficult period for the apostles, because Christ was no longer with them in person to help guide their teachings and their actions. They had to figure out how to spread the Gospel and continue to be followers of Christ when Christ was no longer there in bodily form for them to follow. And so the apostles began the struggle that all Christians since then were forced to struggle with—trying to live their lives as Christ would have them live without Christ directly telling them what to do. But just as the apostles were not left alone and abandoned, so have we not been abandoned. Even though Christ has ascended into heaven he still intercedes for us, asking as we hear in the gospel, “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” And as we will speak more about next week, we have also been gifted with the presence of the Holy Spirit to help guide our actions and help remind us of what Christ has taught us.

But even with Christ’s intercessions and the Holy Spirit’s guidance, it can be difficult for Christians to properly live as Christians in the world. Because evil forces and temptations are at work to undermine our attempts to be good followers of Christ. Some of you may remember the sermon during Lent when we spoke about the nature of evil. Where we affirmed that God does not create nor intend evil, but for some reason inaccessible to us permits it to operate within appointed bounds. We also discussed how God is actively at work through human agents to challenge and resist evil, so that any small victory over evil in this world is a sign of God’s ultimate victory and that evil will be conclusively and finally defeated and obliterated by God in the final judgment.

Yet until that time comes, we humans are forced to contend with the powers of evil—both the evils we encounter and the evils that bubble up from within ourselves. Although we are not powerless against evil, we are also not immune to it. The Epistle 1 Peter reminds us that our adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. And that we must be firm in our faith in order to resist him. Though God is all-powerful, and the works of Satan and evil have no sway over

God, we humans are fallible, prone to wander from the teachings of Christ and to follow evil pathways—to give into the temptations of Satan.

And so we Christians live in a constant state of struggle, fighting between our desires to give into the temptations of the adversary, Satan, and our desire to follow the guidance of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. While the adversary bids us to act based off of fear and selfishness and hatred, the Advocate urges us to instead act out of faith and humility and love. The only way we can effectively resist the adversary is by choosing to instead follow the Advocate, which can be difficult. The Holy Spirit generally does not speak to us in audible, easy-to-understand words. We cannot simply turn to the Holy Spirit with our questions and concerns and receive a simple and concrete answer. Seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit takes practice and patience. It takes prayer and scriptural study. It takes actively seeking out the Truth. And most of all, it can take trial and error. We may believe we are following the guidance of the Holy Spirit only to realize after that we were misled. We may convince ourselves that we are following the will of the Advocate, only to realize we were simply justifying our own selfish actions. But the more we practice seeking the help of the Holy Spirit as we go through our day-to-day lives, the more it will become second nature to us, and the more likely we are to truly follow the Spirit's guidance.

Some may think that doing this is useless, or maybe even a bit silly. Yet seeking out the Advocate is not an exercise in futility, but is the act of displaying belief in the promises of Christ, because it was Christ himself who promised us that the Holy Spirit would aid us in our struggles to follow Christ. Many Christians are more comfortable asking themselves the question "What would Jesus do?" than to reach out to the Advocate. But seeking out the help of the Holy Spirit is merely asking the more important question, "What did Christ teach me to do?" from the person of the Trinity whom Christ himself taught us would help answer this question. Yes reaching out to God the Holy Spirit for guidance is reaching out to God in a way that God the Son taught us to. Though it may be difficult for us to get into the habit of doing this, it will help us to turn away from the temptations of the adversary, and turn instead to the teachings of Christ. Let us seek to do as our Savior Christ has taught us, and learn from the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Amen.