

So much of how I understand the Spirit's work in the world comes back to this very passage in the Gospel of John. Jesus says that the Holy Spirit is our Advocate, our helper, who is the Spirit of truth.

The Advocate, or paraclete in the Greek, means the one who comes alongside us.

I first really encountered this passage in a seminary class with my academic advisor, the Rev. Dr. Karoline Lewis. She proclaims that we are all called to be paracletes, to walk alongside one another, throughout all of the challenges and difficulties of living into our callings. Our calling as followers of Christ is to accompany one another.

As Christ so fiercely and ardently accompanied and led his disciples, so we as the body of Christ are called to be present to one another. Even when Christ addressed his disciples in this passage that he would no longer be physically present with them, so we in this time of physical distance are also particularly called to come alongside one another in spirit. Christ's death and ascension, physically leaving, did not stop his disciples from continuing to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ. They learned how to be and lead the church and proclaim Christ's death and resurrection in new ways. And they leaned fervently on Jesus' promises of the Advocate, the Spirit, who is within them always, and truly is within us too.

It is particularly time for us to be empowered in these promises of Christ, that the Spirit is indeed within us, and will be forever.

The Holy Spirit is Jesus' way of assuring us that he is always present with us. The Holy Spirit is the holy presence that comes alongside us in all we do. The Holy Spirit empowers us in our most holy calling, to love God and love our neighbors.

The Spirit coming alongside us provides us assurance in two ways. The first is that the Spirit abides with us and will be in us. This is our understanding of Spirit as breath, as wind, as the constant presence and essence of what it is to be alive. In the ancient world, in the original Hebrew language of our spiritual forebears, the word for Spirit is ruach. And ruach not only means spirit, but also means breath and wind, just the same. In the ancient world, these meanings were intimately connected, and known to be within us. We feel our breath, we feel the wind, and we feel the spirit of God stirring in our hearts, to live into loving God and neighbor. It is God's ruach that is breathed into Adam to create the very first person, the breath of life that animates him. This same ruach is the breath of life that animates us too.

The second is that there will always be people who come alongside us too. All of us are filled with this spirit, the power of life, the spirit of truth, and we are all connected in that spirit. We are all empowered by the one who comes alongside us and from that assurance we are able to come alongside one another. We are made for connection, it's one of the deepest longings and longest lasting desires of all humanity. We long for one another. We long for the people who will come alongside us in every and all times in our lives. We long for people to understand us for who we are, what we need, and be comforted by their presence. And we long for love in the ways that we are used to receiving it.

This is part of why isolation is so hard for many of us. We long to be around the people to whom we are beholden, the people we love, the people who come alongside us. It's hard to know how to come alongside someone when we have to keep our at least six feet of distance and don't really have anywhere to go. It's hard to feel the loss of what was so natural, the coming together as one people of God in one place, and be physically present with one another.

But, Jesus in all His glory and wisdom and might gives us powerful insight on this very longing. Jesus calls the Spirit our Advocate, the one who comes alongside us and will be with us forever. Jesus assures us that we will never be orphaned. We may not see the human Christ anymore, but because the Spirit is in us, because we are all called to be Christ's body, we are therefore Christ for one another in the world. And being Christ's body does not have to look one certain way or another. It does not have to carry on tradition just for the sake of tradition.

Christ's body, the church, in the world has looked lots of different ways over time. The earliest churches for hundreds of years were small gatherings of people in homes, quietly proclaiming the good news and assuring one another of the promises of hope together for fear of persecution and death. Just because worship and church looks different from what we are used to does not mean the presence of Christ is not still within and among each and every one of us. Just because we are physically distanced for the love and safety of our beloved people does not mean we stop worshipping God and proclaiming Christ in all parts of our lives. We are always Christ's body together. Each with our own skills and callings and characters and uniqueness, but still gathered together in the hope and promise of the resurrection. Gathered together by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate of God who comes alongside us in all our suffering, all our frustrations and questions and grieving and anxiety and exhaustion and curiosity, and eventually joy, we are still together one common body, one humanity, one people of God who is deeply, deeply loved.

So let's live into the Spirit's promise, to come alongside us, by coming alongside one another. We are all experiencing the newness and trauma and uncertainty of this age, like nothing we've ever encountered before, and we all have so much more in common than we do in difference. Let's come alongside one another in love, loving God and one another and Christ commands us to do. Reach out to one another. Call a friend. Be bold and write a card or even just send a text to someone you want to connect with. And connect with your own spirit, recognize the Spirit's work in you and be comforted by that holy presence. Tend to your spirit and be kind, to yourself and to one another. Keep the commandments that Jesus has given us, to love God and love our neighbors, and our spirits will heal and thrive. And in keeping these commandments, as Jesus promises us, God will reveal himself to us. We are deeply loved by God and always will be, and from that place of love we are empowered to come alongside one another in all times and places. The Holy Spirit certainly makes it so. Thanks be to God, Amen.