

The Promise of The Lord's Presence

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May 26, 2019

Jesus said to his disciples **19Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.**" [Matthew 18:19-20] When Christians gather for love, peace and good, the Lord is there.

The gift of Christ's presence in our lives is assured when we accept it and incorporate it into our lives. If we can just get ourselves out of the way and let Christ reign then we see the Lord's presence alive in our lives. Christ is with us.

There is story of a young pastor and one of the members of the church he was serving. It was the late 1960's. Twenty two year old King Duncan was a student pastor, serving two small churches in northern Maryland.

One of his parishioners, Mrs. Maude Stambaugh, was one of the oldest living members of one of the churches. Frail and ill, she spent her final years being cared for by her daughter in her daughter's home. She was unable to leave her room except for trips to the hospital twice a month to receive the blood transfusions that kept her alive.

When he first went to see her, the pastor found the experience quite difficult. Mrs. Stambaugh had advanced Parkinson's Disease. Her hearing was poor which meant he had to shout into her ear to be heard, and she was close to being blind.

"What do I do now?" he thought to himself as Mrs. Stambaugh's daughter excused herself from the room. Seminary had not prepared him for this. He sat beside the bed, intimidated and uncomfortable, before cupping his hands and shouting into her ears "how are you doing today?"

Mrs. Stambaugh responded with a pleasant expression and mumbled something which he could not quite understand. King Duncan knew he had to do something for this woman, but he had no idea what. For 15 minutes he sat there in silence, until finally he opened the New Testament and began to read some verses aloud. Though he read loudly, he was not sure if she heard. He finished with a prayer. But would he whisper it or shout it into her ear? He decided he would simply speak in a very loud voice.

So Pastor King prayed and left the room, cupping his hands around her ear one last time before exiting the room. "Good to see you, Mrs. Stambaugh," he shouted.

Of course, that was a lie. He had found the whole experiencing discouraging, disheartening and very awkward. He would prefer to do anything than return. But return he did, for he was Mrs. Stambaugh's pastor.

Every month or so King visited her; each time shouting in her ear to greet her, then sitting in tortured silence for 15 minutes, before reading from the bible, then praying.

Eighteen months after his first visit, Maude died. After the funeral King was walking toward his car when Mrs. Stambaugh's daughter came hurrying up to him. "Pastor Duncan, I have something for you. This was the last thing mother wrote before she died," her daughter said with warmth. "We thought you would want to see it." She handed him a note. It took some time to decipher the handwriting. This is what Mrs. Stambaugh had written, "Please tell my young pastor how much his visits meant to me."

King Duncan learned what we all must, that our presence is one of the greatest gifts we can offer. Though we may feel awkward, useless and discouraged, our presence to another human being in his or her hours of darkness is a precious gift.

Like Rev. Duncan, we too, can be put in a place of being a presence in a person's life. We can also be in the Lord's presence at any moment when we recognize his presence in our lives.

We must always, always remember that God is with us. God dwells among us as Immanuel which means "God with us." This even shows through in what Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew chapter 28 verse 20 **"And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."** The promise of God to be our companion is one we can rely on throughout our lives.

This morning's reading from the Gospel of John reminds us of Christ's love and draws us into a relationship with him. The person who seeks the heart of Christ and God is one with the almighty.

Jesus is speaking to his disciples about their love for him and how they commit themselves to him. Even before we get to the gospel reading today, the Lord prepares the disciples with the promise of the Holy Spirit. Listen to earlier verses of John 14 especially verses 15 thru 21:

15 "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17 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.

18 "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. 19 In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. 20 On that day you will know that I am in my Father and you in me, and I in you. 21 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." The Lord is promising an Advocate to be with the disciples forever. The disciples then and to us today. The Holy Spirit abides in the disciples lives; he will not leave us orphaned or alone. Jesus promised this Spirit to be with us forever.

In responding to one of the disciples about this promised companionship, Jesus draws them closer to him as they live their lives within a community of faith. Jesus said in John 14 beginning at verse 23 **"... "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. 24 Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.**

Jesus then offers an ongoing relationship with the promise of God's presence through the Holy Spirit, the Advocate. **25**"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. **26**But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. The Spirit will be with you. The Spirit will be with us.

The Greek word for Advocate is paraklets. The Strong's Concordance defines Advocate as "an Intercessor, Consoler: Advocate, Comforter." Other lexicons define it as the "Holy Spirit as Helper" and means "One called alongside". So in the context of this passage, the Spirit was promised to remain with Jesus' disciples always. Jesus promised this Spirit. This same Advocate is promised by the Lord to be with us throughout life.

The Lord will be with us and watch over us. The Lord will take care of us in all the messiness of the world and all the joys of the world.

Friends, this Advocate is actively alive for us too. We can rely on the Spirit in any circumstance to be a companion or to come alongside us at any moment. We can even entrust our lives and those of others into the Lord's care. At a service to remember the life of a loved one or friend, the Advocate assures those who grieve. As a congregation, the ministry of presence is ongoing and essential. When we totally seek to immerse ourselves in the Lord, we can be at peace knowing that a comforter is there with us at all times. We just need to focus. We just need to remember that God is with us.

As many of you know, I played a lot of sports when younger and banged up this body. Well, back in the summer of 1995 the injuries began to show their ugly existence. I blew out a disc in my lower back and the nerve on my left side was compressed. As I waited for my back surgery at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, I would walk on the block where I lived. As I walked, I tried mightily to keep my walking straight but my left foot and leg wouldn't go the way I wanted them to go.

When the day of surgery arrived, I was truly nervous and afraid. Family called, members of the church called and friends called me to reassure me that they would be in prayer that day especially during the procedure.

The one thing I want to share with you about that day was when I placed my Spirit into God's hands and entrusted my family into God's care. Along with that was the hymn that popped into my mind to give me comfort and ease my fear. It is a hymn that I remember ever since childhood called "If Thou But trust to Guide Thee."

1. If Thou but trust in God to guide you,
and place your confidence in Him,
you'll find him always there beside you
to give you hope and strength within;
for those who trust God's changeless love
build on the rock that will not move.

Georg Neumark, 1641

The words were and are of great comfort to me and calmed me down. I moved from fear to assurance as I placed my trust and my Spirit into the presence of Lord. I found a place of total peace as I lay there in pre-op and then into the operating room. The last thing I remember before the anesthesia took over was humming the tune to that hymn.

To this day, I remember that hymn; I sing that hymn. This is a reminder to me of God's love and God's care, and how God's presence was with me during that time.

Each one of us has an opportunity to be with God. We sometimes forget about the Spirit that is with us. But when we focus on Christ and his love, we are in tune with Christ's Spirit, God's Spirit. There is a sense of calm that comes over us, there is calm. There is a sense of peace.

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, our living God is always close by and offering the eternal life in love and peace. You can say with assurance that God is my Creator and the one I hold onto through my personal relationship with Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit in my life. This gift of the Holy Spirit is what holds us close to God. And in many cases, holds us together. Immanuel, God with us.

In closing, remember the words of the Lord as he offers peace in life when one is in a loving relationship with God. Jesus said **27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.**

So we affirm, Come Holy Spirit and bring us peace in the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the love of God. Amen.

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Supporting Scripture:

John 14:23-29 (NRSV)

23Jesus answered him, **“Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. 24Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. 25“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. 26But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. 27Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. 28You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. 29And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.**