

WHEN THE ADVOCATE COMES

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-28, 16:4b-15

Last Friday I led an interment service in New York's famous Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. Woodlawn is one of the most famous burial grounds in the country because there are so many famous people entombed there. The names on the mausoleums are a Who's Who of American entertainment, military achievement, and corporate power. There you will find the graves of Duke Ellington, J.C. Penny, F.W. Woolworth, Irving Berlin, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Fiorello LaGuardia, Barbara Hutton, and George M. Cohan, to name but a handful of the famous and memorable *residents*. Woodlawn was once described as the place in New York "where the rich and famous meet and decompose."

Not far from the place where I led the service Friday lies the grave of a man by the name of Dewey "Pigmeat" Markham. In the 1960's he was a comedian who appeared regularly on a show called Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In. And "Pigmeat" Markham was a staple of that show, best known for a skit he performed again and again in which he warned, "Here come de judge."

It was a riff on the pomposity and power of the American judicial system and the helplessness of a poor African American man in the face of the one who was to pass judgment on him. It was so popular and so telling as a parody of the imbalance of power in this country that it was one of the most well known phrases to emerge from the 1960's.

The idea that someone is coming, someone is on the way to deal with matters, is a powerful image in storytelling. The big bad wolf, the boogeyman, the grim reaper; all represent a threat to safety and well-being. Someone is coming and it's not good.

When I was a kid, we were always concerned about the Red Menace, and I can remember in school seeing films in third and fourth grade that showed a world map, in black and white, and enormous arrows that pointed away from the Soviet Union toward the United States. There were huge arrows from China and Vietnam, and all of Eastern Europe, and then from Cuba and South America and Central America all engulfing the United States. It was clear that communism was on its way and it would be taking over the world and it would be no time at all before we would be overrun as a nation with the terrible threat of Soviet expansion.

I'm not sure what we third and fourth graders were supposed to do about this menace, but it certainly drove home the point that we were not safe, and someone fearful was coming to get us.

Religious images often warn of the impending doom of judgment. They are caricatured in the New Yorker's cartoons with a haggard and forlorn prophet walking in Times Square with a sandwich board over his shoulders warning of "Doom." One of my favorites is such a figure carrying a sandwich board that announces that "The Last Days Are Now." Yet he is oblivious to the fact that above his head there is a safe that has fallen out of a window and is just about to crush him.

Someone is coming and it won't be good. A few years ago the Smithsonian's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage published a story on some old slave songs that had been recorded on dictographs long ago and were being restored. They were actual recordings of slaves who sang once again the songs they sang in the fields picking cotton and baling hay. In one plaintive song the slaves sing,

There's a man goin' round takin' names
He took my father's name
And he left my heart in pain
There's a man goin' round takin' names

There is, I suppose in all of us, a fear that we will be found out, exposed, and judged harshly. The truth will be spoken and we will be known for who we truly are. The light of judgment will shine upon the deeds of our lives committed in the shadows, and we will find out that all along there's been a man goin' 'round takin' names.

Jesus in his teachings sometimes refers to that final judgment. Matthew 25 tells about the judgment in a way that makes the hair stand up on your arms. The sheep are separated from the goats, and the determining factor in separating those who are punished from those who are rewarded has to do with whether we clothed the naked, or gave a glass of water to someone who was thirsty, or gave a sandwich to someone who was begging for food, because when we did those things we were doing them to Jesus himself.

Of course, many of our thoughts and expectations of the final judgment and the One who is coming to render that judgment have to do with our suspicion that it's really those *other* people who are most likely to get the worst of it. There are scores to be settled and judgments to be rendered against all the people who have wronged us. And we are confident that *they* will get *their* due.

God in that sense is the divine score settler, the one who makes good all our grievances against others. The problem, of course, is that there are always those who have grievances against us, too, and none of us makes it through this mortal coil without making our own share of mistakes, committing our own helping of sins, and displeasing God in ample measure.

We would be well advised to take the counsel of the writer of the book of Proverbs who notes that, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."¹

In John's gospel, however, there is an interesting counterpoint to the fear latent in the expectation of the One who is coming. It is a promise made by Jesus to the disciples before he leaves them. The setting is the farewell speech that Jesus gives to the disciples before his arrest and death. There is anxiety and confusion among them because Jesus keeps talking about his own suffering, his impending death, and his departure from them.

It's like those awkward conversations that occur sometimes when you are talking with someone who is gravely ill and you both know that that other person is dying. And he says out loud, "When I'm gone, please take care of Mary," or something like that, and your first instinct is to say, "Now don't talk like that, you're going to be all right." But in truth you both know that that is not the truth, and that all you have communicated is that you cannot talk that honestly, you have not yet accepted the whole truth, because

accepting that truth means that you accept the fact that you too will die someday, and that is more truth than any of us bears very well.

So Jesus makes everybody uncomfortable at that Passover table by talking out loud about the fact that he is going to die. He knows this because he has seen the clouds forming, the handwriting on the wall, the coins in Judas' hands.

And what does he say about his death? He says that after he is gone an Advocate will come and that Advocate will comfort them in their sorrow.

Jesus says that *when the Advocate comes*, the truth will be made plain, that God has vindicated Jesus' life and death through his resurrection. *When the Advocate comes* he will guide the disciples into even greater understanding and truth. And *when the Advocate comes* they will become evangelists telling all the world what they have seen and heard.

There is of course, a warning about all this; it will not be easy. They will throw the disciples out of the synagogues. The disciples will suffer as Jesus suffered. Times will be harsh and difficult, but the rewards will be great. Because *when the Advocate comes* they will know peace in their hearts, not as the world knows peace, but the peace that only God can give, and it will set their hearts at rest. Their anxiety will be no more.² "Do not let your hearts be troubled," he tells them, "and do not let them be afraid."

This Advocate, to which the New Revised Standard translation refers, is described in other translations as the Counselor, the Comforter. Concisely said this is the Holy Spirit. The spirit of wisdom and truth that will set the early church on fire with passion for the gospel, that will reassure the disciples in the early days of their despair, the Spirit that would calm and center the disciples in the words and life of Jesus, and focus the church in times when it knew persecution and rejection and faced grave threats.

Most of us Presbyterians are not quite sure what to do with the Holy Spirit. Is it an ash tray or a candy dish? We are such a cerebral crowd. We are not like our Pentecostal brothers and sisters given to strange tongues, and hands waving in the air, and expectations of being slain in the spirit, rolling on the floors and receiving miraculous gifts for healing.

I once made mention of that in a sermon, and a woman in the congregation (not here) came to me later that week and said I would be surprised to know that there is more Pentecostal spiritual activity in our staid, buttoned up Presbyterian church than I evidently thought there was. She went on to say that she had spoken in tongues, she had been the conduit for healing power, and the Spirit had overwhelmed her on more than one occasion.

Over the years, I have learned that my narrow understanding of how the Spirit works is too limited, and that others have experienced much more of that presence of God's Spirit than I have. Which is to say nothing in particular except that God is greater in deed and in presence than is captured in the limited experience of any one of us.

For a period between five hundred and a thousand years the Jews of Jesus' heritage held out high hopes for one who was coming, the long awaited messiah. They looked for a time when the messiah would comfort their sorrows and strengthen their hand. Having lived so long as an oppressed people, they yearned for the One who would

come to lead them out of Babylon, to throw off the boot of Rome from the neck of Israel, who would establish a kingdom like the days of David's reign when justice was abroad in the land and the king was not only popular but just.

In those days the person who begged on the street for food or money might say, "Yes, this is the way it is today, but some day the messiah will come and no one will beg for food anymore, for there will be food in abundance.

The woman who was seized by unruly soldiers and raped and cast aside as the spoils of war, would say, "Yes, this is the way it is today, but when the messiah comes, the dignity of every person will be restored and respected.

The family who lost everything from flood or earthquake or fire left homeless in the face of tragedy would say, "Yes, this is the way it is today, but when the messiah comes, everyone will have a home, a place that is safe, a house and a bed where one can sleep in peace at night.

The expectation of Israel for a messiah was full of hope and rife with justice.

And so it was that Jesus, whom we believe was the messiah, promised that when he left, another would come, an Advocate who would usher in the peace Israel longed to receive, who would make right the wrong that the world suffers, who would restore to greatness the brokenness of God's people.

Jesus, himself was nothing like what the expected messiah might be, nothing like it, and yet much more. Instead of the sword of David he took in hand the plowshares of peace described by Micah. Instead of donning the ermine robe of a king, he wore the humble loincloth of a servant. In place of the breastplate of battle, he opened his hands to the nails of suffering.

In so doing he shamed all desire for power, surpassed all longing for fame, and transformed all expectations of what God might do for the sake of us all.

Justice dawned in a new way in the life of Jesus, and in him we see a better way to live, even if we have not yet achieved it.

It was he who promised that *when the Advocate comes* God will continue to dwell among us in spirit and in truth.

As we gather at this table today, we hear once again Jesus' promise that an Advocate is coming; in fact One who has already come in the gift of the Holy Spirit, who comes at times like a rough and cleansing wind scattering our doubts and dispersing our sorrows; like fire in the sky, the lightning and the tongues of flames that manifest God's power. Sometimes the Spirit falls on the world like a gentle breeze that moves the curtains at the window and brings relief from the heat of the day, quiet and reassuring.

God's Spirit comes not as danger but as blessing, not as threat but as promise, not as fearsome but as kindly; healing our brokenness, calming our spirits, empowering us to be disciples of the good news that is ours in Jesus Christ. The gift of the Spirit shows us that God means for us well, that the One who comes bringing God's judgment is not only just but also merciful.

Come to the welcome table where the Spirit of God is present, an Advocate for us. And do not be anxious but be at peace because, *when the Advocate comes*, it will be like friends seated at a table together before a great feast where all are welcome, and all are forgiven, and all are made new again.

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¹ Proverbs 9:10

² John 14:25-27