

# Sermon

Seventh Sunday after Easter | Addie Domske

Yesterday I went on our annual youth group Starved Rock hiking trip. Something we often do in youth group is answer the open-ended question: where do we see God in *x*? Where do we see God in *The Force Awakens*? Where do we see God in the food pantry? Where did we see God during the White Sox baseball game? Where do we see God out on the hiking trail at Starved Rock?

So I make these teenagers sit in the youth room or outside of the Sox stadium or in the dirt along a hiking trail and write in their journals where they see God. They can write, draw, pretend to write... about what they think in response to this question. Their journals are private—they can opt to never share how they responded.

Yesterday when I opened up the group for anyone willing to share, one member replied that before she began answering *where* she found God, she wrote *what* God is to her. I love that idea of first considering what we're talking about before we decide where we're going.

So let's do the same with these texts. Let's propose some "whats" we might think about God and then finally get to the "where" we see God.

Here are my "whats" from the Scripture we have before us this morning:

**We can't always find God.**

**God will save us from suffering.**

**The Holy Spirit is our Advocate.**

**Acts | We can't always find God.**

Jesus told the disciples in Acts: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth." \*cue Jesus' magical poof into thin air\*

Let's begin with the understanding that this Acts passage is really weird. It stars Jesus the magician. So even though we might have a Harry Potter Jesus who disappears into thin air, we kind of get the part where Jesus says "you're not really gonna be able to figure out when or where I am all the time, but I will definitely be there." We can't always figure out where God is in our lives. That might not mean that we don't believe God is there, but it does speak to the

reality of our humanness. We sometimes look for God in the wrong places. We are sometimes wrong, but we're open and confused and wondering together about where Jesus is in the world. Despite the premise of my youth group journaling prompt that God can be found everywhere, we can't always *find* God; but we're looking.

**1 Peter | God will save us from suffering.**

My spouse Dan and I are on our third re-watch of the HBO series, *Game of Thrones*. (You have to watch it that many times to learn all the character names.) The series is about a lot of things—power and greed and systems and personalities. It features some unpopular ascensions to power, grassroots revolts, corruption and government cover-ups, squabbling political powers that fight each other all while worldwide destruction is imminent and foretold by the climate-ironic phrase "winter is coming;" it features a great wall built to keep immigrants out—you know...a *fantasy* show.

In the last episode we watched, slavery has been eradicated in a region of the world, but is returning again in a Jim-Crow-like way. The de facto politician in charge of solving the issue, Tyrion Lannister (sympathetically played by Peter Dinklage) is an exiled dwarf and a member of the richest family in the land. Appealing to their self-interest rather than their morality, he proposes a deal with the slavers: this time around, they will abolish slavery not overnight, but over seven years. Tyrion believes this will allow for new structures to be put into place, for slavers to recoup their losses and slaves to learn new trades. After the proposal, his two closest advisers, former slaves themselves, confront Tyrion. When he shirks their concerns, saying that this is a step toward a sustainable future, one of them tells Tyrion: "Seven years is not a short time for a slave."<sup>1</sup>

When I heard that I immediately thought of this 1 Peter passage. For some, I imagine it brings a lot of hope—that God will save us from our suffering. For me, I find it really problematic. The passage reads: "And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you."

"And after you have suffered for a little while?!" "Seven years is not a short time for a slave." Seven years is not a short time to suffer from mental illness. Seven years is not a short time to experience

<sup>1</sup> "Book of the Stranger;" *Game of Thrones* Season 6

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physical or verbal abuse in a relationship. Seven years is not a short time to be denied the right to be married. Or the right to vote. Or the right to go to the bathroom where you feel the safest. Seven years is not a short time to be incarcerated. Seven years is not a short time.

While giving thanks for the restoration that will come, I think we are allowed to ask the question: who is with us as we suffer for a little while, *today*?

### **John | The Holy Spirit is our Advocate.**

The Gospel text today is really interesting because it's a monologue of Jesus talking to God. Jesus basically says, "Hey, I told everyone about you—now I'm asking on behalf of those people that believed, for you to remember them when I'm gone."

In last week's sermon, Peter used the term *paraclete*; I want to return to it to understand what Jesus is asking for here. I first heard this term in high school when my mom was in seminary—her Microsoft Word always auto-corrected the term to "parakeet." *Paraclete* is actually a Greek word—there are two ancient Greek words often attributed to the Holy Spirit: *pneuma* and *paraclete*. The ancient Greek word *pneuma* (πνεῦμα) is translated as "air," "wind," "breath," or "spirit." We get English derivatives like "pneumatic," and "pneumonia" from it. *Pneuma* and its forms occur over 500 times in the NT.<sup>2</sup>

When I was 12, I was confirmed. We were asked to bring an artistic example that described our faith. My 12-year-old self confidently decided that the greatest descriptor of the Holy Spirit ever known to humankind was Cat Steven's 1971 song "The Wind" so I brought that in. That's *pneuma*. My early impression of the Holy Spirit as this wind-y, breathy, magically disappearing into the clouds, Cat Stevens-y spirit pervades the NT in language and theology. It would make sense if you only thought of the Holy Spirit as a wind-like ghost.

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<sup>2</sup> Just, Felix. "The Spirit/Paraclete in the Johannine Literature." The Spirit/Paraclete in the Johannine Literature. August 20, 2013. <http://catholic-resources.org/John/Themes-Spirit.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Paul and Acts use a verb form of the word – "to call to one's side" (παράκαλέω) occasionally, but not as much as the Cat Stevens' *pneuma* Spirit is used.

<sup>4</sup> Kysar, Robert. *John, the Maverick Gospel*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976. p. 128

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 128

But we have this second meaning of the Spirit, the Paraclete. This noun (παράκλητος) shows up only in the Gospel of John the book of 1 John (a letter probably written by the same community).<sup>3</sup> Like Peter mentioned last week, the Paraclete's context outside of the New Testament was a courtroom. So, "Paraclete may mean 'one called to the side of another to help,'... [as] one who is called to assist a client in a court case."<sup>4</sup> For this reason, we find the translation "Advocate" in the NRSV and "Counselor" in the RSV. Within this judicial context, the Paraclete is the defense attorney...an "intercessor."<sup>5</sup> When Jesus leaves and implores God to remember the people, the Paraclete is the answer.

### **The Holy Spirit is our Advocate.**

Now, I know we began with magic, flying Jesus, but I honestly think this third passage is the harder of the three to believe. I could understand if you're listening and thinking quietly that you're disappointed that the "Holy Spirit!" is the answer. For a lot of us, it might be hard to identify the Spirit outside of this building. **We can't find God all the time.** We hear that God is with us and will save us from our suffering but sometimes **seven years is a long time.**

Mr. Rogers often said that when he was a boy and would see scary things on the news: "My mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.' To this day, especially in times of disaster, I remember my mother's words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world."

So, today, this week, this month, this season: take out your youth group journals, sit in the dirt, and define what you might think about God:

**We can't always find God.**

**But we know God will save us from suffering.**

**Look for the helpers, the Advocate.**

**Where do we see God today?**