

# “When the World is a Dangerous Place Jesus is Walking Beside You”

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## Reflection for Sunday, May 17, 2020

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About a week ago I was in Shoppers Drug Mart when I came to the end of an aisle, I had been following the arrows on the floor, and just passed the spot where the hand sanitizer used to be. At the end of the aisle I faced a 2020 crisis. There was someone in the aisle to the left, someone to the right, and when I turned around to retreat, there was someone behind me! I looked at the three people in return, threw up my arms and said, “I’m trapped!” My fellow shoppers laughed at a situation that could not have existed a couple of months ago. The shopper to my left said, “It’s like we are all zombies now, we are dangerous to each other.” The shopper to my right said, “It’s okay, I am going this way.” They turned up the next aisle and I was able to escape. They all had a sense of humour, which is good, because underneath that humour, I know that everyone is dealing with some deeply sad and painful emotions. We are living in isolation, and other human beings have become a danger to us, and we are a danger to them.

When people dig beneath their attempts to deal with this pandemic with lightheartedness, they are finding genuine grief for all that they have lost, and they find loneliness and fear. Dealing with isolation for two weeks was okay, but now coming up on ten weeks, and with no clear end in sight people are grieving, and saying, “I am lonely, and I am afraid.”

In John 14, Jesus’ disciples were dealing with a period of isolation, fear and loneliness also. For a few weeks now they had been in hiding. Back in John Chapter 11, after Jesus had raised Lazarus from death, the leaders of the church finally became quite open about their plan to kill him. They had been plotting against him through his ministry. They were angry that he had spoken to a Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. In John 5 he healed a man near a pool at the sheep gate on the Sabbath, and in verse 18 it says that the church authorities were determined to kill him. In John 8, after seeking compassion for the woman accused of adultery,

the threats against Jesus continued, and at verse 59 the church leaders tried to stone him to death. In John Chapter 11 the church leaders' intention to kill Jesus became entirely public. We sometimes forget that for a significant part of his earthly ministry of healing and redemption, the church leaders were trying to capture and kill Jesus.

He and his disciple were living in the immediate danger of being killed. By John 14 it appears that they have gone into isolation and hiding. To make matters worse, Jesus has revealed to them that he is going to die; they will be alone. It may be that Jesus' good reputation among the ordinary people of Jerusalem has formed a protective shield around the disciples, but without him the danger will become worse. We know that after his death, they went into hiding, and in several instances, it was behind locked doors that he appeared to them.

So, what does Jesus say to his disciples when they are in isolation, lonely and frightened? He says, at John 14:16, and he is saying to us today, "I will ask the father, and he will give you another helper, who will stay with you forever. He is the Spirit." The term, "another helper" comes from the Greek term παράκλητος, meaning one who comes alongside. It has to it the sense of being an advocate or a defender as in a court case.

As you struggle with loneliness and isolation, I want you to know that the Holy Spirit is with you. If you have trouble identifying with something as vague as a Spirit, remember that while the Spirit is distinct from the Father and the Son, the Spirit is of the same essence as the Father and the Son, so it is Jesus who is walking by your side through your most difficult times

I want you to experience the presence of Jesus in every moment of your life. I know it is not a natural thing, you have to work at it. I know that lots of people tell me that they do not feel the presence of Jesus. Many say that they felt Jesus' presence when they were a kid, but now they don't. The events of life have left them without a sense that Jesus is with them. Sickness, bereavement, failure, disappointment, broken relationships have left them feeling alone. Some people express that feeling by saying, "My life did not turn out as I expected, and now I don't think that God is with me."

Right now, life isn't turning out as any of us expected, and many do not feel God's presence. But Jesus is still saying, "I will ask the father, and he will give you another helper, who will stay with you forever. He is the Spirit." And God is really great at being with people in isolation, and

bringing them comfort and peace. Many of the most powerful and helpful stories in scripture are stories about people who feel God's presence during a time of isolation, and respond with hope and courage.

Moses' life was not turning out as he expected. He was raised a prince, but spent forty years in exile, separated from his people. But he experienced the presence of God in his time of isolation, and went on to live a life of fighting for justice for the oppressed.

David's life was not turning out as he expected. He was anointed king, but found himself isolated in the wilderness. But experienced the presence of God in the wilderness and went on to live a life of defending the weak.

Daniel's life was not turning out as he expected. He had lived a righteous life, but was thrown into the lion's den. But he experienced the presence of God in the lions' den and went on to a life of caring and justice.

Paul's life was not turning out as he expected. He had lived a life of defending the church against the blasphemies of Jesus and his followers, but now he was a follower of Jesus, and was dying in a cold, damp dungeon because of his faith. But he experienced the presence of God in the dungeon and went on to live a life of sharing God's love with outsiders.

In their time of isolation all of these people felt the presence of God, and kept their faith confidence and joy because of it.

I want you to experience the presence of Jesus with you during this time of isolation. And to help you with that I offer two ways which might help you to experience Jesus' presence even in the most difficult time.

First, tell God that you want to experience God's presence. Cry out in prayer, saying, "Lord, let me feel your presence." If we feel the presence of God, then we will have strength through any difficulty. You can lose the presence of God. In 1 Samuel 16:14 God took his Spirit away from Saul when Saul became self centered and obsessed with his own power. In Psalm 51 David cried out to God, "Take not your Holy Spirit away from me, and cast me not from your presence."

Second, I want you to think about what the presence of Jesus is. Cynics might say that feeling the presence of Jesus is like having an imaginary friend; just something that we make up to comfort ourselves. But there is substance to the presence of Christ. In many of the cases of our great Biblical heroes experiencing the presence of God during isolation or any time of fear, the common factor is that the heroes are the people who are deeply concerned for justice, equality and dignity for the oppressed.

When Moses experienced God's presence in the wilderness, it was not so much in the form of a burning bush, but in the form of his great compassion for a people who were oppressed in slavery and needed to be set free. The presence of God, for Moses, was his burning desire to ease the suffering of a slave people.

When David experienced God's presence in his time of wilderness isolation, it was not in the form of a dream or a vision, but in his burning desire to create a kingdom based on justice, equality and defending the weak. The stories of David defending helpless sheep, and slaying giants on behalf of an oppressed people became a metaphor for his heart for justice.

Likewise, Daniel's experience of God's presence in the form of an angel in the lions' den should not push aside the idea that what truly motivated David was fighting for justice for his people in the midst of an oppressive empire. Such a Spirit cannot be defeated by the lions of the world.

And Saul experienced the presence of God in the midst of his caring for oppressed people under the rule of Rome. No earthly prison can destroy the Spirit dedicated to justice.

God's people experience the presence of God when they are caring for the oppressed, loving the weak and poor, and standing up for the rights of those who cannot fight for themselves. And you will experience the presence of Jesus with you, not as some weird insubstantial feeling, but in your compassion and dedication to the cause of justice, equality and dignity for all people. That's where God lives!

If you are not feeling God's presence, try this. Refocus your life on people in need. Rededicate yourself to mission. Ask yourself what you can do to help the weak, the suffering and poor. Are you giving enough of yourself to the cause of helping and healing those who are hurt?

We feel the presence of Jesus when we lose ourselves in our caring and compassion for others. And that is because, in a sense, caring and compassion for others *is* God.

The love you feel for your children, that *is* God.

The love you feel for your parents, that *is* God.

The love you feel for your spouse, that *is* God.

The love you feel for those who are suffering, that *is* God.

God is not just an external, theological, church-based concept intended for religious people. God is love.

When his disciples faced a period of isolation, marked by loneliness and fear, Jesus said to them, "I will ask the father, and he will give you another helper, who will stay with you forever. He is the Spirit."

I want you to feel the presence of Jesus walking by your side in all that you do. And I know that his presence is eternally tied to your ability and desire to care for the needs of others. Are you lonely and afraid? Renew your compassion for others, and I guarantee you, that you will feel a presence, perhaps long forgotten, and you will recognize your Saviour coming alongside you once again.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.