

Holy Spirit the Comforter: A Reflection by Rev. Dr. Alan Lai

Just in case you read this reflection before watching the YouTube video, the video for this Sunday is about celebrating Asian musicians. You will see my friends, Tak and Tae Maeda from my former congregation, and also Miri Lee of Gilmore Park United Church playing beautiful music. I also wish you to have a blessed Victoria Day long weekend! I am not going anywhere!

The Easter season is soon coming to a close. I am astonished how time flies. It was not long ago we struggled for not being able to hold Easter Sunday worship service in the church building. How quick we have adjusted to this reality. I wish you are all doing well.

Today's text is about Jesus saying to his disciples the coming of the Holy Spirit:

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth,..." John 14:15-17

The coming of the Holy Spirit enables the church to give witness to the Gospel. That doesn't mean everything is smooth sailing. Throughout history, all God's people have experienced varying degrees of chaos and confusion, and needed to be encouraged, even rescued. The most obvious example is the story of the Exodus. God sent Moses.

Today, I focus on one characteristic of the Holy Spirit, that is the Comforter. The idea that the Holy Spirit is the Comforter seems to suggest that God comes to ease our distress, encourages us, and liberates us in times of trouble. Throughout our lives, we experienced the calming and comforting nature of God. What we need to do is to recount times of restlessness, and remember how the Word of God or the faith of the community empowered us to be hopeful.

But my friend Dr. David Lose asks an interesting question from another angle. He asks whether calling the Holy Spirit the Comforter is right. When he was doing a careful study of the biblical verses related to the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, he finds out the Spirit didn't comfort anyone; on the contrary, the Holy Spirit continues to push people out of a comfort zone, and it really makes things more complicated. Think of how the Spirit came and then pushed the disciples to speak the truth. But then think of the danger and hardship the disciples experienced because they spoke the truth!

So, do we want to speak the truth? When I think about this, I think of the chaotic situation this virus has created. Of course, social distancing is an inconvenience, and the pandemic is concerning. But what I find astonishing is the reactions of some people including world leaders, and how they are not able to consider the seriousness of this situation. Some of them push hard

to reopen schools, restaurants, sport events, and the economies. No! We are not there yet! It is an inconvenient truth.

The Holy Spirit as a Comforter does not take away our difficulties and problems. Increasingly, it is clear to me that that is not the intention. Speaking from experience, this is more likely: The Comforter gives hope, strength, and comfort to people despite danger and problems, so that they can weather the storm with grace and courage. The outward situation may not have changed, or may not be what we expected, but something unexplainable in words similar to peace and calm comes to us in unexpected ways because of faith. No, I don't mean faith is a magic wand; and yet, that is what faith in God can do to us in times of uncertainty.

The Holy Spirit can still be called a Comforter, as it is a constant reminder that we are not orphans. We have a companion in life, a story to tell, and a way of life to show. The Christian communities face all sorts of challenges and difficulties even before this pandemic crisis hit. But that is nothing new. The Chinese for word "crisis" is composed of two words: "danger" and "opportunity." I don't usually look into Chinese etymology for spiritual thought. But this word seems fitting for us to ponder the wisdom it espouses. May we see not only the danger of a situation, but also the opportunity albeit hidden, that is presented to us. May we be comforted to know that we are still God's messengers of peace, hope, and courage in the troubling world.

The Creator promises the coming of the Comforter, so we don't need to be afraid.

Loving Creator, this is a trying time for many of us. It has been so long not able to resume life the ways it used to be; and it may take a while. We ask that you give us patience, trusting better days are waiting upon us. May the Holy Spirit continue to speak to us, and comfort us not to lose hope. Enable us to see what opportunity you have given us to be your messengers of love, even in troubling times. Amen.