

Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36; 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

The City of Irvine, California, has a website that includes information about what to do if you find a baby bird on the ground. Should you pick it up? Should you leave it alone? Does it matter what kind of bird it is? Interestingly, the website says that crows actually throw their babies out of the nest. What! Why would a parent do that?



Well, it turns out that is one way the babies learn to fly. It also helps protect them from predators because the babies aren't in the same place all the time. The wily raccoon that knows there are baby birds around will sooner or later find them if they are always in the same place. Moving the baby crows around actually helps preserve their life.

Now, we're not baby crows and God is not throwing us out of the nest – or at least not exactly. And yet, those first followers might have felt like they were thrown out of the nest when Jesus, who had died, was resurrected and had spent 40 days with them, now ascends into heaven. Was Jesus really gone for good this time? How do I live now that Jesus “for true” (as one of my friends says) is gone? Those disciples probably felt abandoned once again. They most likely felt unsure and inadequate.

Unlike ET, they couldn't “phone home” to get directions. Ah, but we're told in the reading from Acts that they will receive the power of the Holy Spirit. Not so alone after all. A new way of living, yes. But not alone.

For those of you who had the privilege of going away to camp or to school, you may remember both wanting your parents to leave as soon as you got there (after all you were a grown up now) and yet having times when you wanted the comfort of home – the familiar – somebody else to tell you what to do.

In some ways, it seems to me that Jesus had to leave this earth in order for us to grow into all that we are called to be as followers of Jesus the Christ. After all, if Jesus was always around, wouldn't we be tempted to lean on him for everything? To answer all our questions? To “take charge” and tell us what to do? Send him an email when we were perplexed?

Just as children can take on more responsibility for more complex tasks as they grow up, so too can we grow more fully into a deliberate and intentional Christian life. Just as we are always a child of our mother and father regardless of our chronological age, so we are always children of God. We are never alone. God, through the Holy Spirit, is our comforter and our advocate.

The scriptures this morning remind us that God is active in our lives. God goes before the people when they march through the wilderness. God is present when the earth quakes.

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God provides for the needy. God gives strength and power to the people. We are told to cast all our anxiety upon God because God cares for us. God will restore, support, strengthen and establish us. Jesus asks God to protect us so that we may be one. God is always present – in good times and in those times when we struggle. Whether we feel God’s presence or not, God is still present. When we don’t feel God’s presence, it may be more because we are absent to God than God is absent from us.

Just like the baby crows that learn to live through being thrown out of the nest, we learn and can grow in our faith through our life experiences. Sometimes those life experiences are not pleasant.

We can stand looking up to heaven, as the men of Galilee were doing, waiting for someone else to act and take care of us. Or, we can accept that we live on earth and are called to act here and now.

There are undoubtedly times when we must work with those we disagree with. There are undoubtedly times when we have to do things we don’t want to do. There are undoubtedly times when life doesn’t seem fair. There will undoubtedly be times of loss - some small and some huge. But in each and every one of these events, God is present. God, through the Holy Spirit, is our comforter.

Note what happens in the reading from Acts after the two men in white spoke to the men of Galilee. They returned to the upper room and devoted themselves to prayer. And also note that the women were with the men, praying together. And, the reading from the Gospel of John is called a “high priestly prayer.” Over and over again in the Gospels, we are told that Jesus goes to pray. In the prayer from the Gospel of John read today, Jesus asks on our behalf for protection of those of us left on earth because Jesus is going to God. We are never alone. When in doubt, pray. Pray for guidance, pray for thanksgiving, pray in celebration. Always, pray.

But sometimes we don’t feel God’s presence when we pray. Sometimes we may experience what St John of the Cross described as the “dark night of the soul.” Mother Theresa lived most of her life in a dark place of the soul. Her biography says that she had *20 minutes* of spiritual clarity in *40 years* – *yes, years*- of work for the Lord. As First Letter of Peter tells us: “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.” Now, I’m not advocating nor do I want to experience such a long dark night where it’s hard for me to feel God’s presence. At the same time, I can find comfort in knowing that someone who is regarded as a saint was able to keep on working for God even when she felt bereft – she felt thrown out of the nest before she was ready. She knew God was present even though she couldn’t feel God’s presence. Knowing that God was present was enough to help her “keep on keeping on.”

At the time the Book of Acts was written, the world of the new Christians, especially those living in what is now Israel, was in turmoil. Scholars believe this scripture was written between 70 and 100 C.E. The Romans had put down another rebellion in Israel and had destroyed the Temple. Indeed, the name of the land was changed from Israel

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back to Palestine by the Romans as a symbol of their success in putting down the rebellion. Also, the way Jews worshipped had to change as a result now that the Temple no longer existed. It is likely that the relationship between the Jewish people and the Christians was also strained – and probably past the point of breaking. In times of extreme change, it can be hard to feel God's presence.

But God is present. We see this in God's promises to the faithful. Jesus tells us that He will be with us to the end of the world. The future remains open and hopeful. God's promises make a difference in how we live our life. If we believe that Jesus is the Christ, the one who died, was resurrected and now sits at the right hand of God, then we can have hope that life is everlasting.

What pain we suffer now is not the end.

At the same time, we *should not* hold up suffering *simply* for suffering's sake as any kind of goal.

We *should not* seek out suffering to prove that we are believers.

That's not what the scripture is saying.

What it *is* saying is that when we suffer, keep our focus on God.

We cannot control everything that happens to us.

Sometimes bad things just do happen to good people.

We can be assured however, that God feels our pain.

God will be with us always.

One part of seminary education includes Clinical Pastoral Education or CPE. My CPE was 11 weeks full time at IU/Riley over a summer.

Part of the CPE requirements included 7 overnight shifts, when the student chaplain was the only chaplain on call for both hospitals. We had to respond to any emergency, any death, and any other call from staff.

Among the things I was called to do were to baptize dying babies, to be with the families of those who had died or were in the process of dying, and to talk and pray with those who asked for a chaplain. It was hard work. Some of my peers were afraid of being with someone who was dying or who had died before the chaplain got to the room.

My experience was different. I found God *most present* in those circumstances. Not because I wished anyone would die – rather, that my being present gave comfort to the patient, the family and friends. My being present was a visible symbol that God cared for them. It was an awesome responsibility and one that made me take a deep breath more than once!

One of the more heart-wrenching and yet God affirming cases was a baby that died very unexpectedly. The 21-day old baby had been doing reasonably well and then all of a sudden, he took a turn for the worse and died within minutes. Shock barely describes how everyone felt. As I met with the father, and asked him if he would like to pray, I asked him what he would like me to say about his son. Little did I expect that he would smile

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and say “well, he won’t ever wreck the car!” Possibilities that would never be realized in this lifetime.

God was definitely present as we prayed together – giving thanksgiving for this brief life while acknowledging the grief we were feeling. Mixed with the shock and the grief was absolute assurance that God was present. Even though we have no idea why this happened, we were comforted with knowing that God felt our pain. God was with us in this moment of tragedy. God was with us as we prayed. When we feel alone – when bad things happen to good people- we can take heart in Jesus’ prayers as a model for our life and circumstances. Jesus knew we would face hard times. Jesus knew we needed one another as a community of faithful believers if we were – and are – to flourish. Jesus prayed. Can we do less?

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Can we do less?