

“Abiding Presence”

“And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

It is said that “absence makes the heart grow fonder,” but lately I’m beginning to have my doubts about the wisdom of this well-known proverb. After almost three months of absence – absence from work, absence from school, absence from worship, absence from gathering with family and friends – our hearts may in some ways grow fonder for those from whom we are absent, but they are also growing in other less positive ways. We may find our hearts filled with sadness, emptiness, longing, despair, and grief; we yearn for a return to a time not long ago when absence did not define our lives, and living with the uncertainty over when the time of absence will end and what the post-COVID world will look like can lead us into places of darkness and doubt. Even though the world looks the same on the outside, all that we are missing has led us into a dark valley from which there appears to be no escape.

- “Coffee cups on the counter, jackets on the chair; papers on the doorway – but you’re not there. Everything is everything ... but you’re missing.” – Bruce Springsteen.

Our present-day struggles with absence may help us understand the mixed reaction of the disciples in their encounter with the risen Lord Jesus Christ at the end of Matthew’s Gospel. This is the first scene in Matthew in which the disciples have appeared since they fled during Jesus’ arrest (*“Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.”* – 26:56). Presumably, they remained in Jerusalem until they received the announcement from the women who were commissioned by Jesus to *“go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”* (28:10). They returned to the mountain that Jesus had appointed for their post-resurrection rendezvous (*“But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.”* – 26:32). The disciples have come to faith in Jesus’ resurrection through the testimony of the women, and now *“the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.”* (28:16). It is in this place that the disciples see the risen Lord for the first time; their response to seeing Jesus is not amazement, fascination, or curiosity. Instead, Matthew reports that *“when they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted.”* (28:17). Many have reacted with amazement at the report that some of Jesus’ disciples were filled with doubt in his presence; how could anyone doubt the reality of the resurrection of Christ when they see him face-to-face? Even Thomas – the most notorious doubter in the New Testament – left his doubts behind when he saw Jesus and hail him as *“my Lord and my God!”* (John 20:28). If “seeing is believing,” how could anyone doubt the truth of the resurrection when the risen Lord is standing right before them?

“Doubt” (*distazo*) is a word that is rarely used in the New Testament; its only other occurrence is in Matthew’s account of Jesus walking on water, when he reaches out to pull Peter from the waters and asks *“you of little faith, why do you doubt?”* (14:31). Their doubt was not the result of theological skepticism, of questioning the validity of the faith that Jesus had taught them, *“but the risky wavering of the one who must decide when more than one possibility seems reasonable and right.”* (M. Eugene Boring). It carries the sense standing in two places at the same time or being of two minds; it presents a picture of the disciples as both worshiping the risen Lord Jesus Christ while at the same time pondering what this implies for them,

especially is Jesus' resurrection means that he will no longer be with them as he has been in their midst since he called them into discipleship.

Jesus does not appear to notice the mixed reaction of his disciples, or if he notices he makes no comment about it. Instead, he issues what is called the "Great Commission," in which the disciples are entrusted with the ministry of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. It brings with Jesus' declaration that "*all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*" (28:18). It is God who has bestowed divine authority on Jesus as the Son of Man, authority that was proclaimed on the mountain of Transfiguration when "*suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!'*" (17:5). As the crowds who heard his Sermon on the Mount were "*astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes*" (7:28-29), Jesus points to this divine authority as the basis for his entrusting his message to his disciples, commissioning them to "*go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*" (28:19-20a). They are commanded to make "disciples," people who will join them in accepting the invitation to follow Jesus, to join in the community of the faithful who hear the Word of God and live in obedience to that divine Word. These new disciples are to come from "*all nations*" (ethne, "Gentiles"). After the particularity of Jesus' earlier instructions to "*go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*" (10:5-6) this command may have come as a surprise; yet the Gentile mission has been hinted at elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel, beginning with the appearance of the "*wise men from the east*" who come to Bethlehem to pay homage to the child of Mary and Joseph (2:1-12). Matthew also references Isaiah to show how Jesus' ministry is the fulfillment of the prophetic word:

- "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." – 4:15-16; Isaiah 9:1-2.

After the resurrection, the invitation to discipleship is open to all people of all nations, who will be incorporated into the disciple community through being baptized "*in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*" Baptism is the act marking the transition from outside the Christian community to discipleship within it. While it has its origins in Jewish cleansing rituals (Exodus 30:17-21) and in John the Baptist's practice of "*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*" (Luke 3:3), Jesus institutes a new sacrament through which one is incorporated in the community of disciples through water and the Word, baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity, "*the one encountered in Jesus as the Son of God and in the Spirit led church as the people of God ... the one true God.*" (Boring). The disciples – and the entire community of Jesus' followers that is the Church – are commanded to baptize in "*the strong name of the Trinity ... the Three in One and One in Three, of whom all nature has creation, eternal Father, Spirit, Word.*" (ELW Hymn 450, "St. Patrick's Breastplate").

- "We call a child devout who is born of upright parents, who obeys and is like them in every respect. Such a child rightfully possesses and inherits property and the full name of the parents. Thus we Christians, through our rebirth in baptism, become children of God ... since we are baptized into these names and are consecrated and hallowed by them, and since they have thus become our names, it follows that God's children should be called and also be gently, merciful, chaste, just, truthful, guileless, friendly, peaceful, and kindly disposed toward all, even toward our enemies. For the name of God, in which we were baptized, works all this in us." – Martin Luther, 1519.

Through the Great Commission, Jesus sends his disciples into the world with the message of salvation and reconciliation that is for all people through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those who are commissioned for this work are far from perfect; but *“it is not to angels or perfect believers, but to the worshiping/wavering community of disciples to whom the world mission is entrusted.”* (Boring). Jesus commissions *“people who both worship and doubt as they stand at the edge of the world that is passing away and the one that is coming to them.”* (Stanley Saunders). The one who taught with authority in the Sermon on the Mount now gives his disciples the authority to teach the newly-baptized believers *“to obey everything that I have commanded you,”* living the lift of discipleship that is defined by hearing the Word of God and living obediently according to God’s Word.

- “Sacramental teaching is teaching that encourages people to look for the promise of new life in every text they study, and to look for the promise of new life in their own lives. In so doing, sacramental teaching embodies the theological theme of communion, for God’s work is discovered in relating fully and deeply with diverse peoples and communities, diverse texts and situations.”
– Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, *Teaching as a Sacramental Act.*

The Great Commission – and Matthew’s Gospel – does not end with this command for the disciples to baptize and teach. Jesus has called this community of wavering followers, those who worship him while still filled with doubts and uncertainties, and knows that they may be wondering what the uncertainties of their future will mean and what it may be like to deal with the absence of what they have left behind in order to follow him. So the Gospel ends with a word of assurance: *“And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* (28:20b). Jesus is *Emmanuel*, “God is with us,” the divine presence with his people as they make decisions, study, pray, preach, baptize, and teach. Jesus’ last words are a promise of his continuing, abiding presence during the church’s mission, the assurance that *“where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”* (18:20).

Because in Holy Baptism we have been *“sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the Cross of Christ forever,”* we have the assurance that the abiding presence of Christ is with us always even in the midst of absences that can fill our hearts with doubt and despair, praying with confidence that *“Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me. Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all who love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.”* (St. Patrick’s Breastplate). We live in the blessed assurance of Christ’s abiding presence, knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in our Lord and Savior, recognizing Christ’s presence all around us even when we are living with absences that often do no make our hearts grow fonder.

- “The ways in which Christians have come to recognize the face of the living Christ exist mainly within the assembly of those gathered in the name of Jesus who have drunk of the Spirit and have become ‘the body of Christ’ ... Jesus is embodied in the text that speak of him. Jesus is embodied in the sacraments. Jesus is embodied in the lives of the saints. Jesus is embodied in the little ones of the earth.” – Luke Timothy Johnson.

There are ways in which the current absences we are experiencing may be making our heart grow fonder of aspects of life have previously taken for granted. In the future, a simple gathering of family or friends will no longer be considered routine. The ability to go out for a meal, or stop by the hardware store for a few items, or get our hair cut will be more appreciated. Coming to worship on Sunday morning will no longer be a given but cherished after a long period of absence from gathering around Word and Sacrament.

But there will be other absences that will not foster fondness but will continue to fill us with sadness and mourning; there will be changes in our lives of which we are as yet unaware, aspects of life that will be gone forever. It is a time for us to lament what will forever be absent even as we anticipate filling our hearts and lives with cherished moments and relationships that will one day return. But no matter how absences affect us, we live in the sure and certain hope of that which will never be absent from us: the love of God that is ours in our Risen Lord Jesus Christ, the blessed assurance of Christ eternal presence, the living hope at the centre of our faith that "*neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever.*" We will continue to be the disciple community that is called by our Lord to share the love of Jesus with all people and baptize in the name of the Holy Trinity so that we might live in that blessed hope that "*from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.*" (Romans 11:36).

- "Have no fear, little flock ... for the Father will keep you in his love forever. Have no fear, little flock!" – ELW Hymn 764.

Amen.