

Move I: Orphans

Standing in the rubble of a lost society, all evidence suggests that our heavenly Father has abandoned us, making orphans of us all.

This is how the Judeans felt as they were led away into exile. The book of Lamentations, which was written in response to the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon, makes this claim. When the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, many felt as though God had abandoned Judah. Lamentations 5 begins, “Remember, O LORD, what has befallen us; look, and see our disgrace! ... We have become orphans, fatherless.” (5:1, 3).

Orphans were, and still are, among the most vulnerable members of society. Without the goodwill of strangers, orphans have no one to care for them and little agency to care for themselves.

Now Lamentations may, in part, be pointing to the fact that many Judean fathers were killed in battle against Babylon, thus leaving many children orphaned. But I think this is a reference to a spiritual orphaning as well. Without their God, the people of Judah felt as orphans, stripped of their protection, their livelihood, their future.

The prophet Hosea also describes an orphaned Israel. Hosea, who prophesied before Israel’s exile, urges Israel to return to God and be spared invasion. “Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God,” Hosea urges, “In [God] the orphan finds mercy” (14:1, 3).

Hosea uses the metaphor of the orphan to describe Israel's situation. They have orphaned themselves by rejecting God as their father. But God shows mercy to the fatherless. God will become their father again.

Move II: Context

Today's gospel reading is a continuation of last week's reading. It is all part of Jesus' farewell discourse which takes place on Maundy Thursday. As Jesus prepares for his arrest, crucifixion, and death, he offers some final words of exhortation and comfort to his disciples. In today's reading, Jesus begins to address the issue of what will happen after he is gone.

The disciples are worried that Jesus will leave them, and they will be like orphans. It's understandable, isn't it? How often do we wish that we could have been one of Jesus' disciples, that we could have walked with him and talked with him and ate with him and listened to him teach? How strong our faith would be then! The disciples are worried about the same thing. Sooner or later it seems like Jesus is going to leave, at first, they assume, through his death, but ultimately through his ascension into heaven. Then what are they supposed to do?

Those feelings are not unlike Israel and Judah's feelings when they were conquered and exiled. Jesus' ascension into heaven and the Babylonian exile seem to have nothing in common—except that they both feel like an abandonment. Life is better with Jesus around; why on earth would he leave?

Move III: Not orphaned

As the disciples despair, Jesus offers some of the most comforting words in all of scripture: “I will not leave you orphaned.” It is as if Jesus is speaking not only to his own followers but to all of Israel and Judah. “You feel as though you have been orphaned, but I will not leave you that way.” Jesus and the Father will continue to be present in the lives of the disciples even after Jesus’ ascension into heaven. And the reason for that presence, Jesus says, is the Advocate.

In Greek, the word for advocate is *parakletos* or *paraclete*, and it is Jesus’ name for the Holy Spirit. A *paraclete* was one who pled another’s case before a judge. The word can also be translated as helper or comforter. After Jesus departs, the Father will send *another* advocate to support the disciples.

Wait, *another* advocate? Who was the *first* advocate? It seems that Jesus is referring to *himself* as the first advocate. So when Jesus says that the Father is sending *another* advocate, we can assume that this new Advocate, the Holy Spirit, will fulfill in our lives the same purpose Jesus fulfilled in the lives of his disciples. We need not wish that we could have been with Jesus in his time because by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is with us in ours.

Move IV: The Advocate’s Role

Though Jesus no longer walks this earth in flesh and blood, we are not orphaned. We have a new Advocate: the Holy Spirit. We don’t talk about the Holy Spirit that much, do we? We’re

comfortable talking about God the Father, and Jesus the Son, but we breeze over the Holy Spirit because frankly we don't know what to do with it. The church throughout the ages has not done a good job of understanding exactly what the Spirit's role is in our lives; or at the very least, preachers (myself included) have not done a good job communicating it.

A good portion of the New Testament is devoted to exploring who the Spirit is and what the Spirit does, but we need not even leave the Gospel of John to get a deeper understanding of the Spirit's role in our lives. In chapter 16, Jesus says, "and when [the Advocate] comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment" (16:8-11). What exactly does that mean? According to Jesus, the Holy Spirit serves at least three functions: to create relationship, to encourage testimony, and to expose brokenness.

Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will prove the world wrong about sin. Sin in the gospel of John, as we know, means a lack of relationship with God. When the Spirit proves the world wrong about sin, that means that the Spirit will overcome sin by drawing the world into relationship with God through Jesus. The Holy Spirit is the means by which we have a relationship with God.

Secondly, Jesus says the Spirit will prove the world wrong about righteousness. A verse later, Jesus links righteousness to his ascension, that is, the reality that there will come a time when we won't see Jesus anymore. Testimony is a key theme in

John's gospel. John the Baptist *bears witness* to Jesus. Jesus *bears witness* to the Father. Now the Holy Spirit will *bear witness* to Jesus by urging Jesus' disciples to *bear witness* themselves. The Holy Spirit urges us to testify to our own relationship with Jesus and the Father.

Finally, Jesus says the Spirit will prove the world wrong about judgment. In John's gospel, judgment is served not for immoral behavior but for a lack of relationship with God. The Holy Spirit serves to convict the world of its lack of relationship with God. This is not judgment for the purpose of damnation but rather salvation. The Spirit works to convict us of our broken relationship with God and then, moving back to the Spirit's first function, draws us back into a relationship with the Father through Jesus.

Move V: We are not orphans

Next Sunday we will celebrate Jesus' ascension into heaven, and in the midst of this pandemic it might feel like just another abandonment. Like Israel and Judah, we may feel as though our Father has left us. Like the disciples, we might stare into the heavens wondering where Jesus has gone. But Jesus promises that the Father will give us an Advocate, the Holy Spirit who resides in all of us. And Jesus' promises are sure. The Holy Spirit lives inside you even now, reminding you daily that your Father has not abandoned you.

Jesus says "I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." By the power of the Holy Spirit we dwell in God and God dwells in

us. The Holy Spirit draws us into a restored relationship with the Father and then urges us to testify to the world about that relationship. Despite what we may think, God has not left the world orphaned. We have an Advocate, God the Holy Spirit, who unites us with Jesus and the Father, and who sends us out into the world to testify to the God who will never leave us.

Amen.