

Riverside United Church
25 August, 2024

Offered by - Karen Percy

Scripture Reading:

Ephesians 6:10-20

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power;

11 put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil,

12 for our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on the evil day and, having prevailed against everything, to stand firm.

14 Stand, therefore, and belt your waist with truth and put on the breastplate of righteousness

15 and lace up your sandals in preparation for the gospel of peace.

16 With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

18 Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

19 Pray also for me, so that when I speak a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel,

20 for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

John 14:16-17

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.

17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

Payer

Holy One, source of truth and light.

Pour out on us the Spirit of truth, wisdom and understanding.

So that our hearts and minds may be opened.

Amen

Reflection: *Spirit of Truth Resides Here*

This morning, we heard Paul's words to the Ephesians describing the required clothing that one should don when claiming to be a follower of God. Paul mentions putting on the whole armour of God to be comprised of a breastplate of righteousness, lacing up our sandals to prepare for the gospel of peace, a shield, and a helmet.

Though Paul is quite specific in what is warranted regarding the type of clothing we should be acquiring - we know that God requires nothing materialistic from us. This is the farthest thing from the truth. It is one of the things that I admire most about being a follower of Jesus. There is no special membership fee to pay, or no specific uniform to wear whether it be inside or outside of church. God is not concerned with which brand of clothing we wear, the type of vehicle we drive, nor how much money is in our bank accounts. How comforting is that!

What is important, is as we heard in John, when we are ready to be followers of God, we will be equipped with all we will need to navigate both the joys and challenges of life. We will be equipped with the Spirit of truth that will abide with us and it will be within each of us as we journey through life.

Though in John's Gospel, Jesus's words are being offered to the disciples to prepare them for his pending journey to Jerusalem. Jesus is hoping that if the disciples hear these words now, then when his life's purpose becomes a reality, that it will be seen and understood as confirmation that Jesus will abide in us; that this moment of confirmation will only deepen their faith and belief in the Spirit of truth.

These words this morning are not about getting ready for Jesus to leave us, but to remind us, that should we choose to be a follower of Christ, we will have all we need - within us. How relieving it is to know there is nothing extra that we need to do, no special skill sets to acquire - we will be given an inner knowing, a fortified knowing of truth - that the Spirit of God will reside with us, guiding us along our way.

Jesus is encouraging that the disciples to recognize that God will work through them; and that he will be the doorway to this new experience of how we will connect with the Divine. John refers to this new aspect of God as the Advocate. It is this Advocate who will open new doors and lead us in truth. Jesus is calling the disciples, calling us, to trust our knowledge and to trust who we are. We now become the door for someone else to come to know God.¹

While preparing and reading for this sermon, I was intrigued by the words found in the Gospel of Mary. At this point, you may be wondering if you heard it right. Yes, I did say the Gospel of Mary, and I realize this may be new information for some, if not most of you. I mention it not to be dismissive of the Holy Bible, as we know it, but because I am intrigued by hearing someone's else's account of what Jesus was saying at that moment. After all, if we say that Jesus had at least twelve disciples and many other followers, it opens us up to the possibility that other accounts / recollections about Jesus' teachings could exist without us having knowledge or discovered these texts. I must admit, prior to taking my course this summer, at the Atlantic School of Theology, I had no idea that this gospel even existed or that there are other gospels as well that have not been published in the Bible and remain to be explored! It has been said that the Gospel of Mary was not known until its manuscript containing large portions of text were discovered in 1896; and it was not until 1955 that it was published.

When I read the Gospel of Mary (Magdalene), her account of Jesus' words to the disciples were as follows: "God will send you an Advocate to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth who abides with you and within you. The Spirit, whom God will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you all that I have said to you. The wind blows where it chooses. You hear its sound but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with the Spirit."²

John and Mary's account of Jesus' words are indeed quite similar, and both speak of the Spirit of truth being within us. John's Gospel conveys Jesus' words in one short verse whereas Mary's description, as we just heard it, was in three verses. For some reason Mary's version provided me a clearer meaning of what Jesus was trying to convey compared to how it was written in John. Upon Jesus' death, we have been told through scripture that Jesus will come to make himself known unto us in Spirit form. God will send their son, Spirit of truth, who will abide and remain in each of us.

This phrase, "Spirit of truth, who will abide in each of us" makes me hear the old familiar hymn, "Abide with Us" a little differently. The hymn rings of a constant yearning and pleading for Spirit to remain with us. Yet, both John and Mary note that the Spirit of truth will remain. So why then do we question this truth so much? The Spirit of truth already resides within us! It is not going anywhere!

If we are honest, we do forget sometimes that this movement within us is our sign that the Spirit of truth is

¹John Shelby Spong, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, (HarperCollins Publishers, 2014), 198.

²Miriam Therese Winter, *The Gospel According to Mary* (New York, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), 90.

there, ready, willing to guide us if we so choose. Yet, at times we forego this peace and we remain with our inner struggle. Sometimes, it is a case of not wanting to do the very thing being asked of us.

At a time in my life when I was denying this call to ordained ministry, I was trying to live according to my faith. Letting my actions match my words. I was not striving for perfection. I was simply trying to be a better Christian, to set a good example of what it means to live out my faith; this became more important as I started to share my own faith with my girls. In the early days of my discernment, my prayer life consisted of saying, "Wherever you lead me, I will follow." Followed by quietly shouting back in the middle of the night, "This cannot be the path you mean!" This went on for months, same question from me, same answer from within - yes, it is. Followed by the same reaction from me - denial and more turmoil.

The Spirit of truth gives us signs along our path to guide us - if we are intentional about coming to know the signs of the Spirit. At times, we may experience these signs in a similar fashion as our neighbour. At other times, we may experience this "knowing" differently from someone else and that is ok. I see that as God having a message that is unique to us at that moment, with a message that is unique to us. It takes effort and a willingness to hone this skill to comprehend the subtleties of this Spirit of truth. Yet, it can be done through practice and through prayer.

As I wrestled more with what the Spirit of truth was trying to tell me, I was denying the signs the Spirit of truth was desperately trying to give me. This morning's readings tell us that even though we might not understand all the intricacies of what it means in knowing the Spirit of truth, this presence is indeed resting within us. Though I recognized the Spirit's presence and do not believe in coincidences - I was not ready to at that time to acknowledge the truth that the Spirit of truth was constantly whispering to me or the many signs I was being given. I was quick to brush off these moments and replied, "I know I said I would follow wherever you lead me, and I am 98% sure this is the path you wish me to take - but it surely cannot be this! So, you will have to give me more signs because I am just not buying it!"

As you can see this morning, I eventually caught on, I started listening to Spirit of truth and I have not looked back! Do I have all the answers? Absolutely not! What I do have though, through much prayer, is a deeper appreciation and a sense of gratitude in the knowledge that I truly do not go alone. This blessing of the Spirit of truth is not just for me. The Spirit of truth is there for all of us, if we so choose to reach out, to initiate this relationship.

Despite what lies ahead and that at times we may feel that the Spirit of truth remains veiled to us - we need not journey alone. We are a prayer away from being united with the Spirit of truth if we dare to be ready to be Spirit-filled and to be forever changed. It does not mean that the hardships will be no more. Far from it! Reaching out in prayer to connect, if only gingerly and tentatively at first; that is the first step so that our soul can come to know respite. If we are open to the breath of the Spirit of the Living God falling upon our hearts, this Spirit of truth is there, ready to guide us. For when we attune and open ourselves to recognize this Voice of Care, it changes what we see around us, it changes what we seek in life. And in the process, we too become changed!

Coming to know the Spirit of truth, the Quiet Whisperer of our heart is within each of us as we are found within the Holy Quiet Whisperer. We are blessed both in our waking and our sleeping, that whatever may befall us in life, day, and night, this inner knowing, this Spirit of truth lies within, eager to be our guiding light, if we so choose. Let us hear the words of a poem To Be Still by Joanna M. Weston, and if you so choose, let these words prepare and open our hearts to the Spirit of Truth.

Focus my speech
Within the light
That all my words
Be holy, bright.

Hold my mind
Within your hand
That all my thoughts
Be your command.

Still my heart
Within your gift
That every choice
Be inspired, swift.

Center my life
Within your heart
That every act
Reflects your art.
Amen.