

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 21, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Presiding: Rev. Marion Pruitt-Jefferson
Preaching: Amalia Vagts

First Reading: Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:8-20; Second Reading: 1 Peter 3:13-22; Gospel: John 14:15-21

When I was younger, I had a pretty significant fear of the dark. This fear would leave me almost paralyzed in bed. I would lie awake at night and imagine over and over that I was climbing out of my bed, walking down the hallway, and climbing into the warmth and security of my parents' bed. In my mind, I would feel the hallway carpet under my feet, feel my hand pushing their door open, and visualize the edge of their bed. And then I would look around, see that I was still in my own bed and start the process all over again. At some point, the memory of how safe I would feel once I reached my parents bed would override my fear of my own dark bedroom and my fear of the unknown hallway and, with hope and confidence, I would leap out of my bed and run for their room.

As an adult, I've *mostly* overcome my fear of the dark, but fear of the unknown seems unavoidable. What will my identity be when I leave my job after 10 years? What will it be like to be in seminary? Will David and I and our boys miss our house? Will we like living downtown? How will our new place turn out? Will we have enough money? Will I be a good pastor? It is easy to become captivated and frozen by the unknown. And my parents' bed is a little further away now. It is not as easy for them to provide answers to these unknown questions as it was to provide refuge from the dark night. Plus, we're all really tall, healthy people and I'm not sure their bed would fit all three of us.

Looks like I need to find another way of getting the comfort and confidence I need in order to get out of my imaginary bed.

I need God.

Our Gospel reading today says that *God will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.* This Advocate is "the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him." This Advocate is here for us. We know this Advocate because it abides with us; it is in us.

When I read this text, I got curious about the Greek word for "Advocate." I did a little research (and consulted with Pastor Amy) and learned that the Greek word is *parakleton* – which is translated here as Advocate, but in other places as Comforter, and Helper – also, as one who comes alongside of us.

All of these translations are informative.. A “comforter” keeps us cozy in our bed, and sometimes we need that. A “helper” provides assistance. An “advocate” comes alongside of us to create a new way.

This understanding of the Spirit as “Advocate” feels especially helpful to me. It would have been easier to enter the unknown, dark hallway if I’d had someone alongside of me. God as Advocate, Helper, Comforter – God is known and unknown to us.

In our first reading, Paul tells the Athenians that he was convinced of their faith by seeing an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown God.” Paul preached, “What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” And then he speaks of a God beyond human comprehension, a God who gives all things, a God who creates from one blood all nations – a God unknown so that in fact we search for and like children walking down a dark hallway, grope for this God.

And yet, God is within us and within each other. What is both unknown and intimately known to us and invites us to challenge our fear of the unknown. By realizing the closeness of God – who in so many ways feels unknown to us we can dare to overcome our fears of what is no known. There is great danger in not overcoming our fear of the unknown. It is not new for our congregation to hear a sermon that encourages us to overcome fear of the other. Pastor Amy preaches powerfully on this just last week, reminding how God compels us to welcome what is strange to us and to create a space of invitation, engagement, and connection.

We are here to live in community and in hope and confidence, not to die in fear of the unknown. The events of our current society illustrate starkly the pitfalls of choosing fear instead of hope and confidence.

There are numerous illustrations of this, but the one I want to talk about this morning is the continuing deaths of black people, mostly men, unarmed, who are killed because they are perceived to be a threat. I believe we have to talk about this very painful subject in congregations like ours, which are mostly white, because if we are not walking alongside those in need, then we are lying in our own beds and ignoring the cries of God and our neighbor to be the Advocate that abides in us. Our pastors have preached on race and our bishops have directed us to dig into this conversation. Many in our congregation and community have been tackling conversations about race at a deeper level through guided study on white privilege and white supremacy. We are making some progress.

Yet here we still are.

My colleague Lenny Duncan, who is a seminary student in Philadelphia, and who is black, and who preaches and speaks regularly and prophetically about violence towards people of color and LGBTQ people asked ELCA preachers to talk this week about Terence Crutcher. This week, a police officer was acquitted of manslaughter in Terence Crutcher’s death. The officer is white. Terence was black. Terence was unarmed and had his hands above his head when he was shot to death. At her trial, the officer reported that she was “scared to death” of Terence.

I don’t tell this story to judge the officer, or any police officer. I tell it because we are all accountable in this ongoing story. I tell it to remind each of us of the peril if we do not overcome

our fear of others. These stories are the ones reported in the news, but most of us have our own stories of fear of the other to tell. All of us, whether we want to or not; whether we are aware of it or not, hold unconscious bias towards others. Let me speak plainly – in a town like ours, many white people are unconsciously afraid of black people. It's not easy to say that. It doesn't feel good. It is true. We can feel differently. We can learn from our children, who often are baffled by the prejudices of grown-ups. But in order to change, we have to talk about it. James Baldwin, the noted African-American writer and social critic writes, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

As followers of God, we are called to act counter to the way the world works. Our world teaches us to be afraid of what we don't know.

God calls us to face what we must change. God has given us an Advocate through which we can advocate. God calls us to action. And God grounds us in hope.

What is this hope that is within us? Why do we dare to hope for a different world? Because we believe in a God who promises this to us. We are a strange bunch of people sitting here together in this room on Sunday morning. We could be cozy in our beds, could be out for a walk in the woods, could be volunteering on a community project. But we are here because we believe this God is real. We are here because we want to learn. We know this world can be different.

This is not easy work. It is not without the risk of peril. We do not do it alone. When I used to lay in bed as a girl, afraid to move, it was ultimately the knowledge that my parents' promise of security and love for me would guard against any unknown danger in the dark. That love helped me to move forward.

In the same way, God's ever-present love, known and unknown, and the promise of community move us forward.

In today's first reading, Paul references a local poet. I found out this poet was Aratus of Soli and the piece Paul quoted is Aratus' epic essay "Phaenomena" on the constellations and weather patterns. I was caught by this line:

"Make light of none of these warnings. Good rule it is to look for sign confirming sign. When two point the same way, forecast with hope; when three, with confidence."

Our world is warning us about what happens when we remained rooted in fear of the unknown, rather than acting on hope and with confidence to advocate for each other. Our African-American neighbors need us to walk alongside them. God, through the Spirit abides within us and within our neighbor.

We begin by facing the unknown.

We remember that we are loved by and love God who is everything, who is our Advocate and who calls us to be advocates for each other.

Grounded in love, hope, and confidence, we act.

Amen.