

Welcome

In 1987, in the town of Monroeville, AL, a Black man named Walter McMillian was arrested for the murder of a White woman. He was convicted and sentenced to death. Two years later, a young lawyer named Brian Stevenson moved to Monroeville to establish the Equal Justice Initiative. His goal was to work with death row inmates to get reduced sentences.

Stevenson took one look at McMillian's case and realized he didn't deserve a reduced sentence. Walter McMillian was innocent. He deserved freedom. At the time of the murder, McMillian was at a church BBQ with more than a dozen witnesses - including a police officer. And that was just the tip of the iceberg.

Over the next two years, Stevenson used all his training as a Harvard-educated lawyer to take on the Alabama justice system. Again and again, Stevenson filed appeals to get a retrial, only to have them struck down or ignored. But Stevenson wouldn't give up. Finally, in 1993, after two years of failed appeals, in his *fifth* appeal, Stevenson demonstrated to the Alabama State Court of Appeals that Walter McMillian was innocent.

McMillian was freed immediately, after five years on death row.

It's a powerful story (if you haven't seen the film *Just Mercy*, based on this story, you should watch it immediately). What strikes me every time I revisit the story is the relentless, invincible conviction of Brian Stevenson. He took on an impossible case, a case that wasn't about justice, but about systemic racism.

And despite the fact that he faced defeat again and again, despite the fact that his client, Walter McMillian had given up before Stevenson even took the case, Brian Stevenson never gave up.

He was a tireless advocate for Walter McMillian.

There are about a hundred reasons this story is so powerful. But today, in the wake of Easter, I want to focus on this one: the power of the Advocate.

I don't think any of us has been in the place of Walter McMillian - I've been blamed for something I didn't do, but to spend five years on Death Row, knowing you're innocent?

But I know what it's like to not have anyone on your side. I know what it's like to be affirmed behind closed doors and denied in public. I know what it feels like to be betrayed - and I bet you do too. To know the feeling of not having anyone in your corner.

So when we see a story about someone who has a faithful, tireless advocate, someone who's always in their corner, fighting for them, speaking up for them...

Wow. It speaks to the deep needs of our spirits. To be seen. To be known. To be loved. To be advocated for.

It shouldn't surprise us that God seeks to meet such a deep need in us. And yet we struggle to believe that God is our advocate. If anything, we believe we need to be saved *from* God, that we need an Advocate between us and God.

But as we'll see, we do have an Advocate. Not one who protects us from God, but God *as our Advocate*. God is in our corner, fighting for us. Defending us. Healing and transforming us.

Message

Last Sunday was Easter, when we gathered to celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Our Easter story ended last week with Jesus appearing to the disciples when they were hiding in a room, afraid to go outside.

That Sunday evening the disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them! "Peace be with you," he said. As he spoke, he showed them the wounds in his hands and his side. They were filled with joy when a saw the Lord! Again he said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." -- John 20:19-22

Jesus breathes on them, giving them the Holy Spirit. This is a powerful image - in both Greek and Hebrew, the word "Spirit" can also mean 'wind' or 'breath'. John imagines the Holy Spirit as the very breath of Jesus, filling us with Jesus' own life and power.

So during this season following Easter, we're going to explore what a life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit looks like. Where does a life whose sails are filled with God's divine wind take us? What does it mean to have the Holy Spirit's divine power transforming us?

We're going to begin today with a promise that might catch us off guard. Before we get there, though, indulge me in a question: have you ever just wished you were one of the people who got to actually *hang out* with Jesus on Earth? When you have a difficult theological question, or when you're suffering, or when you just can't seem to *get* a life of faith, how amazing would it be to just be able to ask the real deal? How much easier would it be to believe if we got to hang out *with the actual guy*?

It's a fair question, and on the surface, it makes a lot of sense.

The problem is that the actual behavior of the people who *did* get to spend quite a lot of time with Jesus doesn't bear that out. The disciples were frequently confused by Jesus' teachings. They couldn't do much without him present. And, as the Easter story reminds us, nearly every single one abandoned him, betrayed him or denied him rather than follow him to the cross.

So it doesn't actually seem that being face-to-face with Jesus was the fix-all we imagine it to be. Jesus was unpredictable, mysterious, confounding and challenging in person.

[Scripture Slide] Of course, that didn't keep the disciples from wanting to keep Jesus with them. Turn with me to John 14. This section of John's Gospel is called the Farewell Discourse, and it takes place after the Last Supper, before Jesus is arrested. These are Jesus' parting words to his disciples.

He's warned them he's about to be taken from them, and they don't understand that he's about to be arrested and killed. But in the midst of their worry, Jesus promises them that, even when he's gone, they won't be alone. They don't know it yet, but he's talking about the Holy Spirit - the same Spirit he is going to give them that Easter evening.

So let's read together, and hear exactly what Jesus says is so good about the Spirit:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth. The world cannot receive him, because it isn't looking for him and doesn't recognize him. But you know him, because he lives with you now and later will be in you. No, I will not abandon you as orphans—I will come to you. Soon the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. Since I live, you also will live. When I am raised to life again, you will know that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. -- John 14:16-20

When Jesus promises the Holy Spirit, he refers to the Spirit as the "Advocate" - it's the Greek word *paraclete*. This was a legal term - it literally means "to be called alongside" and it referred to a person in a court case who was called as a witness on behalf of the defendant. A person who lent their expertise or credibility to the defense of the person on trial.

So Jesus is promising to send someone in his place (notice he calls the Spirit *another* Advocate - they share the same work). We won't be left alone. We'll have an Advocate who speaks for us, who defends us, who testifies to the truth.

Now, it's easy to imagine, hearing this language, that the Holy Spirit is defending us in God's courtroom. After all, how many of us have grown up with images of God as the judge of the universe, watching carefully to see if we're good or bad, and ready to hand down judgment. So we hear Jesus promise the Holy Spirit using this courtroom metaphor - an Advocate who will defend us, and we leap immediately to defending us from God.

But in John's Gospel, God is not a judge but a savior. He tells us as much in that famous passage we love to hold up at baseball games - John 3:16:

This is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. -- John 3:16-17

When John's Jesus talks about us needing an advocate, it's not to save us from God. Jesus shows us who God really is - our loving savior who rescues us, not condemns us. No, in John's Gospel it's the World - those anti-life, anti-faith forces that put Jesus on trial - *they* are who put us on trial. Jesus warns us that, should we follow his command to love each other as he loves us, should we choose to live a life that insists on valuing others above ourselves, that resists systems that reduce people to profit margins - if we don't fall in line, we'll face persecution. We'll face questions.

Why are we different? Who is this God we serve?

Haven't we all been there? In a difficult spiritual conversation? A work friend who is a skeptic. A family member who sees us at our worst and wonders how we can call ourselves Christians. A friend who was hurt by the church. Or one who's studied a lot more than we have and has questions we can't answer.

There are all kinds of reasons we need an Advocate. And that's exactly what Jesus promises. Yes, it's true Jesus is not bodily with us. We can't give him a high five. We can't ask him to explain that parable (like the disciples did). We can't tap him in to do a miracle we can't seem to manage.

But Jesus didn't leave us alone. He sent us an Advocate. Someone who goes to bat for us, who teaches us.

This, Jesus says, is who the Holy Spirit is. Back in chapter 14, skip down to verse 24, where Jesus reiterates this idea:

What I am telling you is from the Father who sent me. I am telling you these things now while I am still with you. But when the Father sends the Advocate as my representative—that is, the Holy Spirit—he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you. -- John 14:24-26

The Holy Spirit will 'teach us everything'. Which is a pretty amazing claim. The Holy Spirit is the one who teaches us, who reveals the way of Jesus to us. The Spirit reminds us what Jesus told us.

Y'all... this is huge. Because if we didn't have the Holy Spirit, then faith would be a lot like history. We're reading about things that happened, people who did things, but they're dead and gone, and we're making our best guesses. Which isn't a slight at historians. They're amazing and do amazing work! But how many historians wish they could actually *meet* the people they study?

That's the difference with Jesus: though he ascended to heaven, he didn't leave us alone. He sent us the Holy Spirit - the third member of the Holy - to live with us and within us. To continue to teach us.

It's a little bit like taking a test on the Civil War with Abraham Lincoln sitting next to you feeding you answers.

But of course even better.

When we read Scripture, we're not reading a history book. We're reading with the one to whom the Scriptures point. When we pray, we're praying *with* the one to whom we're praying. When we worship, the one who invites us to worship is within us, drawing us together and giving us the power to worship!

<Scripture w/ the Spirit>

Friends, Jesus did not leave us alone when he ascended to the throne of Heaven. He gave us the Holy Spirit, the very God, to live within us, to empower us and make us new. That means we have an Advocate - God is in our corner, teaching us, defending us, speaking up for us.

Will you be open?

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] The Spirit draws us to the table.

1. Asdf
2. Asdf
3. Asdf
4. Asd

Assignment + Blessing

“I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid. -- John 14:27