

My to-read stack by the bed is about 10 books deep. It consists of books on navigating trauma, and about dying well; there are coming of age stories, Southern fiction, and a who-done-it ~ all recommended to me by various someones who know me well. At the beginning of this quarantine period, my daughter handed me the book her 6th grade class was reading called *The War that Saved My Life*¹ and suggested I read it. So last week, it bumped the queue, and I found it hard to put down. There are a variety of themes that I am typically drawn to that are explored in this book: the relationship between autonomy/self-determination and collective responsibility, family trauma, overcoming obstacles, perseverance. Without being an overly religious book, it also touches on a number of Biblical themes such as grace and reconciliation, trust and redemption.

The story is about Ada, a young girl in London just prior to WWII. She was born with a club foot – which could have easily been corrected after birth by a routine surgery. But she also has a horrifyingly abusive mother who refused to let her get the needed operation. Ada escapes with her brother when the other children are being evacuated and they come under the care of a woman named Susan in the quiet countryside of Kent.

Ada is not particularly trusting of those who tell her they know what she needs and wants. But in the months that follow her escape, she finds ways of biding her time, and proves to herself that (despite her deformed foot) she is useful and can meaningfully contribute to something bigger than herself. Nevertheless, she continues to resist many of the comforts and kindnesses afforded her by her caregiver, Susan. And so this is the story of one who is hungry, weary and afraid.

Last Sunday, we heard Jesus describe himself as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And this morning, we hear what he says next: that yes, he is departing, but his followers will be gifted with another Advocate who will come abide with them.

First, it's important to understand how John's audience would hear what he is saying. Our (insufficient) English translation says we are being sent an 'Advocate.' But the Greek word Paraclete implies much more than advocacy or support. It also means one who consoles, encourages, stands alongside, guards and

¹ By Kimberly Brubaker Bradley ~ fair warning: if you choose to read this, keep a box of tissues nearby!

guides; one who makes an appeal on behalf of another, and one who is available to be called upon for help. The Fourth Evangelist draws on all of these connotations as functions of the Paraclete as he uses this word throughout the Farewell Discourse.²

Jesus says “I will ask the Father, and he will give you **another** Paraclete to be with you forever.” This clearly implies that he himself is the first. Therefore, this ‘other’ Paraclete is not another name for the Holy Spirit, but is a particular way of describing the *functions* of the Spirit ~ functions held in common with Jesus. What the Paraclete does is not new, but is a continuation of the work of Jesus.

Jesus then refers to the Paraclete as the “Spirit of Truth.” As such, the Paraclete shares in the work of Jesus, because (as the Gospel writer told us last week) Jesus is the Truth. The work of the Paraclete, therefore, is to keep the Truth of Jesus present to the world after Jesus’ departure.³ The Paraclete is repeatedly described in ways that emphasize its presence in and relationship with the community of faith. The Paraclete ensures that the revelation of God in the incarnation does not end with Jesus’ death and return to God.

As the Londoners adapted to their ever-present threat and the reality that the city had not yet been attacked, most of the other children who fled London are retrieved by their parents, and Ada lives in fear of this possibility. She becomes increasingly anxious that at any moment, her mother can come and take her back. While still abidingly distrustful of her new normal, she has begun to settle in, and has discovered that her present circumstances are not *so* bad ~ if she left, she’d leave behind her new friends, new hobbies, and (most critically) the consistent, gentle care and protection she has gotten from Susan. Her anxiety around all of this bubbles up and is expressed through panic attacks, outbursts of anger, and even irrational resistance to Susan’s care and concern.

Roughly 3 years into their time with Jesus, the disciples are scared by the news that Jesus won’t continue to always be with them in the way they’ve grown accustomed. Jesus knows this, and seeks to reassure them. Jesus says to his disciples, “I will not leave you orphaned; **I am** coming to you.” Jesus uses the Greek word for ‘orphan,’ which had two meanings for his hearers ~ it’s a word used for students who are left without their master teachers, as well as for familial

² See also John 14:26, 15:26, 16:8-11, and 16:12-15.

³ As with the unity of God and Jesus in their work, the relationship between Jesus and the Paraclete is also defined by the unity of their work.

and relational dynamics once a parent or guardian dies. Keep in mind, this portion of John's Gospel is heavy with domestic imagery, referring to God as Father, to the disciples as little children⁴, and use of the metaphor of the woman giving birth.⁵ His promise that he will not leave the disciples orphaned reassures John's audience that the intimacy of the familial relationship Jesus has fostered with his disciples is not undercut by his departure; this promise counters any possible perception that his death entails his abandonment of those whom he calls his own.

One of the routines that Susan develops for the children is to read *The Swiss Family Robinson* to them at bedtime. Ada despises the story. In her words,

“That stupid Swiss Family Robinson was all the time making and finding things. It was like magic, it was, how the father would think it was a shame they didn't have any wheat for bread, and next thing they'd stumble onto a whole wheatfield, or a wild pig would run out of the forest just when they got a hankering for bacon. They'd build a mill to grind the wheat to flour, and a smokehouse for the pork, out of nails and wood they just happened to have on hand. [My brother] loved it; he begged for more of the story every night. I was tired of those idiots living on an island with everything they could ever want.”⁶

With God in Christ, through the power of the Spirit, all the spiritual resources we need are at our disposal. That's how we are equipped to live as the Body of Christ in a world that is hurting and tired and scared.

One night, Ada curls up on the sofa so that Susan can massage her hurting foot. She reflects that she is more like Alice in Wonderland, having fallen into a place she didn't belong, a place where absolutely nothing made sense to her. She adds,

We were halfway through reading *Swiss Family Robinson* for the second time. The family landed on the perfect island, where everything they needed was right in front of them. Susan pointed out that they had to work together to put the good things to use. I understood the story better now, but I still didn't like it.⁷

⁴ John 13:33

⁵ John 16:21-24

⁶ Page 121

⁷ Page 223

The same is true for us. Jesus tells us time and again in countless ways that God chooses to continue to be active and involved and present in our lives, and provides us with everything we need when we are tempest tossed and weary and find our spiritual selves in unfamiliar territory.

What a gift it is that we have a steady presence with us always, who will guard and guide, console and encourage. There is a freedom that comes from knowing we are loved, we are cared for, we are supported. We are never truly alone as we guard ourselves and others from a global pandemic, as we advocate for justice and peace on the earth, or as we support and console those who are hungry, weary or afraid. God will never leave us orphaned. As we seek to live as the Body of Christ, the Paraclete is available to us at all times and in all places.

Like Ada and like the Swiss Family Robinson, who discovered they were not truly orphaned or stranded, we, too, must find ways of being resourceful, trusting that all we need is already available to us, and continue to work together to put the Good Things to use.