

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“The Spirit of Truth will Guide You into All Truth”

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“[Jesus said:] “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. . . he will guide you into all the truth . . . He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” (Jn. 15:26; 16:13ff).

Some years ago, Gail and I were hiking in Joshua Tree National Park in southern California. The park is about 800,000 acres. Much of it is desert, though a portion of it is full of canyons. That’s where we were hiking: in the narrow channels between the tall canyons. We learned later that people frequently get lost out there. Every year, people need to be rescued from Joshua Tree, and every year some actually die out there from dehydration or exposure or from falls. It’s an inhospitable place for life.

You know, when you hike in the Midwest, the paths are usually easy to follow because that’s where the vegetation doesn’t grow. In the desert, especially among those canyons, there is no vegetation, and the trails are hard to discern. So, we got lost in a big way. The scary kind of lost. There were no signs or maps. There was no cell phone reception. We couldn’t climb up to the top of the canyons and get our bearings. We were in the rutted out narrow channels far below. It was like a rat maze down there. Many times, we followed a channel, a path that looked promising, only to see it get narrower and narrower and then come to a dead end. We had to turn around and go back and follow a different meandering path to a different dead end.

We thought we had brought along plenty of water; it wasn’t enough. We assumed there would be others around who knew the way and could lead the way. We saw no one. We thought the trails would be clearly marked. There were no signs. (Would it kill the park service to put up a few signs?)

There were signs of people having been there. Footprints in the sand, the occasional ladder leading up or down to the next level. There were cairns here and there, small towers of rocks that people balance one on top of another. We had hoped they were some sort of naturalistic sign indicating the main path, but they weren’t. They were sprinkled around randomly; we even found one cairn in a dead end. (Thanks for nothing you cairn builders!)

We were in trouble. Our water was gone. The sun was setting, the temperature dropping.

Life can feel a bit like that . . . like a maze with lots of possible pathways, pitfalls, and impasses. There are hopeful signs here and there, but their messages are unclear and following them can lead to one dead end after another. Many others have been there; there are plenty of footprints in the sand, but again they only lead to another dead end. You just wish for someone who can take you by the hand and lead you through it all. “Turn left here.” “Say this to that person.” “Don’t go there- that’s a dead end. “Don’t trust this message; it’s a lie.”

“Steer clear of that blogger; his facts are messed up by his ideology.” You just wish there were always someone at your side whom you can trust to help navigate this confusing world.

In our text, Jesus gives us hope. He says the Holy Spirit will bear witness about Him and will guide us into all the truth. The Holy Spirit will show us the Way. The Holy Spirit will keep bringing us back to the truths of Jesus. The Spirit will guide us along the path of Truth.

If there ever was a time when we need the Spirit to guide us along the path of Truth, it is today. Our culture’s slow shift away from Christianity has made daily life bewildering. Things that used to be self-evident, no longer are. We are told it’s perfectly ok to end the life of an unborn child, and it’s actually a right worth fighting for and to be proud of that fight. We are told that simply being white makes a person an oppressor who must confess and atone for their sins and privileges. We are told your birth sex doesn’t matter so much anymore; more important is how you see yourself.

How people think of us as Christians has also changed. Some think we are ignorant and anti-science. Some think we are delusional and have been misled. And if one dares to raise questions, he is viewed with suspicion or even hostility. Name-calling often begins. We are denounced as supremacists or homophobes or misogynists or as extremists. Universities and even corporations have become as dogmatic as seminaries, but I remember the seminary being a place where at least free discussion and dissent was protected and accepted and even encouraged. They baited us!

We are currently living life in a maze that has so many twists and turns and dead ends. So much rhetoric; so little truth. So many misleading cairns and footprints in the sand. So many false signs of hope. We need someone to lead us through this labyrinth.

In our text, Jesus offers hope. He promises to send us the Helper, the Spirit of truth. Today, on Pentecost, we celebrate the realization of this promise. Jesus has ascended into heaven but did not leave us as orphans. He has sent His Spirit to us, to speak His words of truth to us, for us, among us, and with us.

Without the Spirit, we’d all be lost and groping in the darkness. 1 Corinthians 2, “The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness and cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (v. 14). The Spirit helps us make our way in the world. The Spirit enables us to understand and believe the truth of God’s Word. The Spirit helps us discern what is and is not trustworthy.

Jesus is God’s Son, but many in the world do not acknowledge him. In verse 9 of our text, Jesus simply says, “They do not believe in me.” The Holy Spirit, however, has taught us to confess “Jesus is Lord”. 1 Corinthians 12 says no one can do that without the Holy Spirit.

Many think Jesus was just another moralistic teacher. But the Spirit has made us understand Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Many think Jesus was a misguided revolutionary, a problematic prophet silenced by Roman crucifixion. But by Word and Spirit, we know Jesus rose from the dead, and in so doing has conquered death for us. Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life for all who believe in Him.

Many think the Word of God is antiquated and irrelevant. The Spirit has taught us His Word is living and relevant and trustworthy, a lamp unto our feet even in the dark canyons of our day.

Without the Holy Spirit, our lives would end in a dead end. “He that believes and is baptized will be saved, but whosoever does not believe will be condemned.” The Holy Spirit brings to us saving faith in Jesus Christ. Without the Holy Spirit, something else *will* fill the vacuum.

Theologian Paul Tillich defined religion as simply one’s object of ultimate concern. By this definition, there are no nonreligious people, because we are all devoted to something or another. If your object of ultimate concern is your own comfort and happiness, then that’s your religion. If your object of ultimate concern is your home, that’s the idol you serve. If your object of ultimate concern is social justice, that’s become your creed. For some, their object of ultimate concern is to acquire as much treasure as possible. For others, it’s not the accumulation of stuff, but rather the accumulation of experiences and memories . . . eating in great restaurants, travelling to exotic places. These can all become one’s religion.

The Holy Spirit will not lead you down the paths of false religion. The Holy Spirit will always point you to Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is the Way, the narrow, difficult path that leads to safety and salvation. He is the Truth, in a world full of lies and myths and rumors and exaggerations. He is the Life in a world full of darkness and death. “He will glorify me” Jesus said, “for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” In pointing you to Jesus, the Holy Spirit points you to the life and salvation that is found in Jesus alone. More than that, the Holy Spirit gives us life and salvation in Christ.

I’d like to tell you it was resourcefulness and grit that got us out of the Joshua Tree National Labyrinth. In fact, it was sheer dumb luck – grace actually. One of the random paths we chose finally led us out of the darkening canyons. I was never so glad to see a little parking lot with our lone rental car sitting there.

The Holy Spirit will lead us through this maze as well. He is our Helper, our Counselor. When we were baptized, He took up residence within us. He is the Spirit of truth and will guide us in the ways of truth. Thanks be to God. Amen.