

Stressed Out

On Sunday, we resumed our “Ghost Stories” sermon series about the Holy Spirit by studying a passage of Scripture that teaches us how to experience supernatural peace and comfort in our times of greatest challenge.

1. Warm up question: When you get stressed out, what’s something you like to do to decompress?
2. At this point in time, would you describe yourself as facing: (a) many stressful situations; (b) a few stressful situations; or (c) very few stressful situations? What are some of the greatest sources of stress in your life right now?
3. Read John 13:31-36. This passage describes a very stressful situation Jesus’ disciples were facing. On the night before his death, Jesus tells them that he’s going away and they will have to find a way to go on without him.
 - a. What do you imagine life had been like for the disciples for the past three years as they had direct access to Jesus, living and traveling with him?
 - b. How do you imagine the disciples felt hearing Jesus tell them he was going away?
4. In response to the disciples’ anxiety about his departure, Jesus gave them a promise. John 14:27. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”
 - a. If you could be in the heart of Jesus for just a minute to feel the peace he felt, what do you imagine that peace feels like? How would you describe it?
 - b. What do you think Jesus means when he says, “I do not give you as the world gives?”
5. In John 14, Jesus says that the peace he promises is to be found through our experience of the Holy Spirit. In verse 16, Jesus says, “I will ask God, who will give you another *paraclete* to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees nor knows the Spirit. But you know, because the Spirit abides with you, and will be in you.” The Greek term *paraclete* literally meant “one who comes alongside.” According to theologian Gail O’Day, the term was commonly used to refer to “one who comforts, one who encourages, one who helps, one who appeals on your behalf.” (Note: Some translations of the Bible focus on the last phrase and, therefore, translate *paraclete* as Advocate. That is one valid meaning of the term that we’ll focus on later in this sermon series. For now, though, we’re focusing on the comforting, encouraging, helping meaning of the term. Translations that focus on this meaning translate *paraclete* as Comforter.)

- a. We're often taught to think of the Holy Spirit as one who guides us or one who convicts us – and those are valid functions of the Spirit. But seldom are we taught to also think of the Holy Spirit as one who is deeply concerned with comforting and encouraging us. Why do you think this aspect of the Spirit is often ignored?
 - b. When John 14:16 was translated into the Karre language of central Africa, scholars struggled to find a Karre word that would convey the meaning of *paraclete*. They found their answer when they observed how groups of porters about to carry heavy loads through the bush always had one unburdened person whose function was to help anyone who fell down exhausted. In the Karre language, this person was known as “one who falls down beside us.” That’s the term used for *paraclete* in the Karre language. Have you ever thought of God that way – as one who falls down beside you? How do you feel about that way of understanding God?
 - c. Jeff shared several stories to illustrate what the comfort of the Holy Spirit feels like in times of great trouble. Examples included a young man dying of cancer who felt the presence of Christ’s Spirit and said, “That’s just enough,” and a little boy whose Grandma held him close wrapped in a towel when he suffered from chicken pox, and Jeff’s own experience when he was in the emergency room and expected to receive a grim diagnosis. In your own experience, have you ever felt the ministry of the Holy Spirit as Comforter – i.e., a sense of other-worldly comfort in a time of great angst? What happened?
6. In Sunday’s sermon, we talked about two practical steps that can help us become more likely to experience the Holy Spirit’s ministry of comfort and encouragement. **Step 1 is awareness** – to cultivate inside us the expectation that the Spirit will offer supernatural comfort in our times of great challenge. If we start looking for the comfort, instead of being completely preoccupied with the challenge itself, the whole picture can change. Do you buy that? Why do you think expectation is so important?
 7. **Step 2 is to practice putting ourselves in the “thin places.”** In Celtic thought, the term “thin places” refers to “locales where the distance between heaven and earth collapse and we’re able to catch glimpses of the divine, the transcendent, the Infinite Whatever.” (Eric Weiner, *New York Times*.)
 - a. By that definition, what is a “thin place” for you? In other words, what place or situation most often enables you to experience the divine?
 - b. Jeff said, “If we want to become sensitive to the Spirit’s presence, we have to practice putting ourselves in places where we can experience the Holy Spirit, so we develop a sensitivity to the Spirit.” He compared it to developing the ability to sense nuances in the taste of fine wines through repeated exposure. Do you feel that you are allowing yourself to habitually experience enough “thin places” in your life to cultivate a lively sense of the Spirit? If not, what kind of “thin places” do you want to experience more of?