

“Remain”

Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-14

John 1:29-34

Rev. David Hutchinson

Sunday, January 12, 2020

There are FOUR accounts of the life of Jesus in the Bible.

Four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

And there's a fairly LARGE list of things they DISAGREE about.

The birth stories are remarkably different.

The timeline of several events varies from gospel to gospel.

For example, Jesus either turned over the tables in the Temple at the beginning of his ministry according to John - - or just before he went to the cross on his last trip to Jerusalem according to Mark...

There are even a number of contradictions. For example: Mark says - - Mary Magdalene arrived at the tomb of Jesus AFTER the sun had RISEN - - and John says she arrived - - while it was still DARK.

There are four gospels - - and they often do not agree.

SO when they DO agree - - it's important!

Jesus baptism is one thing that all four gospels report in a nearly identical way!

All four gospels say that the Holy Spirit “descended” from heaven like a “dove” at the baptism of Jesus. / They all use the word “descended” - - and they all mention a “dove”. / That must have been important - - if they all report it exactly the same way!

After that point, however, they diverge...

John does NOT mention the voice from heaven, as the other three do.

And ONLY John uses the word “remain”.

The Gospel of John says that the Spirit “remained” on Jesus.

The Spirit did not JUST descend...and alight there...momentarily...

The Spirit descended and remained.

The word used is commonly translated using the root of the word “abide” or more precisely, since it is in the past tense: “abode”.

The Spirit descended and ABODE - - with Jesus.

Think about what it means - - to abide...

As in the old hymn “Abide with me”...

“Abide with me, fast falls the eventide. The darkness deepens, Lord with me abide. When other helpers fail, and comforts flee; help of the helpless, O abide with me.”

The Holy Spirit remained with Jesus.

And THAT is exactly what the first disciples do the very next day - - with Jesus.

They “abide” with Jesus.

They are seeking a teacher - - and Jesus says, “Come and See”

And they “abode” with him!

This is the MIDDLE point - - in the relationship with God in Jesus - - for John’s gospel. / Last week we considered God’s DOWNWARD movement. / John describes God coming DOWN into creation and “dwelling” here. / Literally pitching a tent among us. / So the FIRST part of God’s movement for John is DOWNward.

THEN the MIDDLE point is to intentionally REMAIN.

That’s today’s topic.

Next week we will see that the final step is UP.

The whole second half of John's gospel is the movement back UP to God. We are GLORIFIED - - according to John - - and that involves being RAISED and united with God. / This is much more important to John than the linear, forward moving more narrative or historical approach of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Those three move along in a line from left to right - - past into future.

Birth - - ministry - - Jerusalem - - the cross.

But John wants to emphasize not OUR movement in time - - but GOD's movement toward us - - and OUR movement - - toward God.

So NOT left to right - - BUT down - - and then up.

And right in the MIDDLE of all that...

Between the DOWN and the UP - - God REMAINS.

God ABDIES with us.

This abiding - - is a particularity of John's perspective.

It's important to him.

But it is set in the midst of something bigger - - that was important to ALL FOUR of the gospel writers - - Jesus' baptism. / And the descent of the Holy Spirit.

For the Spirit to descend on Jesus - - as a way of showing God's choice of Jesus as beloved - - was a reference back to the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. / Isaiah had described a "suffering servant" who would comfort and heal Israel - - after the tragic events of the exile - - and deportation to Babylon - - by that foreign power.

But it was not clear at the time - - WHO - - this suffering servant was.

Isaiah hoped for the servant.

And described what the servant would be like.

But there is no real agreement about exactly WHO the “suffering servant” was.

So the early followers of Jesus CONNECTED that prophecy to Jesus.

For them, Jesus was the suffering servant.

And when they described the baptism of Jesus - - they referred to Isaiah.

Isaiah who said the Spirit would descend on the servant.

During the same time period, Jeremiah described the return from exile.

And Jeremiah focused on the PEOPLE who would be gathered back up.

Gathered up and returned home.

And Jeremiah called these people a “remnant”.

A remnant - - is what REMAINS - - of a people.

The Spirit that REAMINS on Jesus - - helps gather what remains of God’s people.

One of the MAIN images for baptism in the Bible is ADOPTION. / And in Ephesians it says that God chose us and destined us to be ADOPTED as children. / Jesus followers were described by Paul as “sons through Jesus Christ”. / And this adopted family was GATHERED UP - - or UNITED - - by God - - in the fullness of time.

So our baptism as followers - - is connected to Jesus baptism by the Holy Spirit.

God comes DOWN into our reality in Jesus.

God remains here with us...

GATHERING us together...

Abiding with whatever REMNANTS of humanity REMAIN faithful.

And preparing us to be lifted UP to GLORY.

THAT is John’s vision for our future!

And I believe that it truly IS glorious!

So where IS that Spirit today - - do you think?

Where is God gathering?

And WHO are the faithful remnants - - who remain?

I have to say that - - sometimes I think I know - - what it FEELS like to be a remnant. / The word rings true. / There are days when I wonder - - how can people be in such RADICAL disagreement - - about what it means to follow Jesus.

Some people have described the current president AS Jesus - - and others see him as BETRAYING Jesus. / And in reference to the very same events!

So what does it mean to follow Jesus?

And WHO are the faithful remnant?

It's pretty disorienting for me at times.

All I can say is - - that I'm still committed to the idea that we ARE ALL praying to the same God and attempting to follow the same Jesus. / People who disagree with you about what that means - - don't define you. / I am not defined by the people in my religion who disagree with me - - no matter how strongly.

INSTEAD - - I AM defined by - - my baptism.

I AM defined by GOD'S action to DESCEND into my reality.

I AM defined by GOD'S action to adopt me as a child.

God's defining action happens in the midst of suffering and exile.

And it is there - - for you and for me.

I'm not sure what I can do to gather God's followers all together.

I'm not always sure what to do about my faith - - but I do my best.

But I AM sure - - that God still gathers US.

Maybe that is our guiding light today in these texts:

Trusting in God - - to be God.

God who ABIDES with us.

God who remains.

No matter what.

And THEN to remember what the FIRST followers did in response:

On the very NEXT DAY after the Spirit REMAINED with Jesus...

...what did they do?

THEY remained with Jesus too.

God abides with us.

God remains.

And WE - - we abide with God.

Whatever else we do or don't do - - relative to other people - -

- - we abide with God.

- - we remain.

Amen