

Over the course of the last year, Shyla and I have gathered over Zoom with a book group which has met every Friday night. We invited a group of people together that we have known for many years at different stages in our life together—a couple who we knew from our high school years, some friends we made in college, some friends that made during the years that I was in seminary. Some of them invited some people to join the group that Shyla and I had never met before. All of these people have been tuning in on Zoom from all over the country: Ohio, New Mexico, Houston, New York. Shyla had the idea that she wanted to gather this group together to read the Decameron, which was a group of short stories originally written in Italian in the late Middle Ages during the time of the bubonic plague (somewhat similar to the Canterbury Tales). Our thought was that if we could read the writings of people who had dealt with a pandemic long ago, it might give us some insight into what we were going through in our time. We ended up finishing that book (which is a very long book) after a few months and after that, the group had gotten to know one another so well that everyone unanimously agreed that we should keep the group going so we read another book together, and then

another, and then another. Next month will mark our year anniversary with this group. It has been such a gift to have these people who have been companions on the journey. Most of us haven't missed many Friday nights. The interesting thing is that when someone is missing from the group on a given Friday, it is really noticeable. We have come to cherish one another's presence and friendship. When someone logs on late to Zoom, I have had the sensation of it lighting up the whole group, we're excited to see that person or couple.

There are these people in our lives who, when they show up, change our whole attitude and outlook on life. We have all had the sensation of being at a party or gathering and feeling unsure of ourselves or perhaps a bit socially awkward and then a good friend show up and it enlivens us and sometimes it enlivens the whole group!

-

This is exactly the experience (in its most elevated form) that this group of exhausted and hopeless disciples have when Jesus returns to be in their midst.

-

Luke's gospel tells us the beautiful story of the Cleopas and his companion who are met by a

stranger on the road. They are trudging along in their sadness and the stranger asks them why they look so gloomy. They look at him like he's crazy—"Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.'" We all know what this loss of hope feels like. We have all been there. When we are so ground down by disappointment that it seems like hope is lost. This mysterious stranger responds with a totally different energy: "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then the stranger goes on to discuss the scriptures with them, enlivening their minds and planting the seeds of hope anew. Then, at table with them the stranger breaks the bread and Cleopas and his companion's eyes are opened and it is revealed to be Jesus before their very eyes. Their response was, "Were

not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"—The flame of hope which they thought had been extinguished was burning anew after Jesus met them on the road.

Cleopas and the other disciple go running to tell the others—even though it was almost evening and it was dangerous to be out on the roads at night, they went flying back to Jerusalem from Emmaus that same hour and began to excitedly tell the other disciples what they had seen. "Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread." All of the sudden Jesus come among them in their midst again. AGAIN they don't recognize him. They are startled by him and they think he is a ghost. Similar to what happened in last week's gospel Jesus shows them the scars on his hands and his feet and he eats a piece of fish in front of them to show them—look its really me, I'm not an apparition, I am risen from the dead.

But then he say to them, it doesn't stop here—this is only the beginning. You need to "stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Jesus is already pointing them in the direction of Pentecost. Jesus is already saying to them, something extraordinary has happened but this thing has only just begun, we are about to do remarkable things in the world.

In John's gospel, the Holy Spirit is referred to as the Paraclete—roughly translated it means the Advocate but it literally means, one who comes alongside.

I love the concept of the paraclete—the one who comes alongside—because it mirrors what Jesus does here. He comes alongside his disciples in their grief. He walks with them through their time of mourning and then he opens their eyes to a new reality a new reality of new life of transformation and of a new creation.

-

Just like that person who we can't wait to see on the Zoom screen or that person who lights up the room at a party. I can only imagine the way that the energy in the room was transformed and brought back to life when Jesus came to be with them in that upper room.

Jesus comes to meet us where we are. He shows up in our very midst. Jesus finds us when we are

walking along the road in deep grief and anguish. He finds us when we are afraid and lonely. He finds us when we are feeling like a wallflower and brings us into the middle of the room.

Jesus comes into this room of grieving disciples and he renews their hope and joy and points them toward the new thing that is about to happen—the idea that they will be equipped with the Holy Spirit for the work that they are called forth to do.

Jesus equips us too. He gives us what we need for our journeys of faith. He gives us what we need to walk alongside others in their journeys.

Jesus kindles the fires of our hearts and awakens hope in the midst of the most difficult times. Amen.