

# Accompaniment

## The Great Theme of the Bible

A sermon by Tom F. Driver

*In 2004 the Iglesia Presbiteriana de Colombia (IPC) sent a message to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). We are being threatened, they said. If you sent some people here to be with us without weapons, we think we would be safer. We need accompaniment.*

*As it happened, the call was heard by the PC(U.S.A.) and answered by the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship and Presbyterian World Mission. And thus began a program that has brought our two churches closer and closer together from then until now, offering hope to many in the name of Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace.*

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**A**ccompaniment is the great theme of the Bible. It is the window through which we should see the whole of the Gospel and the entire meaning of our faith. Accompaniment is what it is all about. It starts on the first page of the Bible. The dazzling insight of the Bible's creation story is the togetherness of things.

Listen:

*"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. [Gen.1:1-2; NIV]*

These first two sentences of the Bible contain its first expression of the theme that God is with us. The whole earth -- that means everything -- was like an empty ocean. We were nothing. But the Spirit of God was hovering there. Like a bird. Wings extended. Attentive. Ready to do something. Right there. Listen:

*And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and He separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day. [Gen. 1:-3-5]*

Throughout this litany of creation in Genesis 1, creation happens in pairs. God sorts things out and brings them together. Light and dark. Earth and heaven. Water and dry land. Day and night. Morning and evening. Humans and gardens. Humans and animals. Man and woman. The first crime in the Bible, the story of Cain and Abel, is the turning of one brother against another.

We can express the Biblical idea of creation this way: Where there is one there shall be two. And where there are two or more they shall be together.



The faith that we are not alone rings through the Bible over and over.

Enoch and Noah, we are told, "**walked with God.**" (Gen. 5:22; 6:9) Before sending the flood, God said to Noah: "**I will establish a covenant with you.**" (Gen. 6:18). What's a covenant? It's an agreement to be bound up with each other forever.

In a time of famine, when Isaac was thinking of emigrating to Egypt, God came to him and said, "**Stay in this**

*land for a while.... Do not be afraid, for I am with you...."* (Gen. 26:3,24)

Later, God renews this promise to Isaac's son Jacob: "*I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go....*" (Gen. 28:15)

And so it goes. Think of Hagar, sitting by a well in the desert, pregnant with Abraham's son, and running away from Sarah because of it. What will become of her? God finds her there and tells her to go home.

Think of God, accompanying the children of Israel when they wandered in the desert, walking just ahead of them as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

Think of God feeding them every morning with manna that came like dew on the ground.

The motif of accompaniment is nowhere more beautifully expressed in the Old Testament than in the Psalms. Most of us learned the 23rd Psalm when we were children:

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want  
....  
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me .... (Ps. 23:1,4)*

But perhaps the most beautiful such passage is in Psalm 139:

*Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.  
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast.  
If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me  
and the light become night around me,"  
even the darkness will not be dark to you;  
the night will shine like the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.  
For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb. (Ps. 139:7-13)*



And so it goes. The theme of being accompanied runs all through the Bible. And it reaches its climax in Jesus of Nazareth. That is, in the way that the followers of Jesus expressed what he was to them. He was so intensely THERE for them, and in such a HEALING way, with such integrity and authenticity, that they began to see him as the human form of God. In the first chapter of the first book in the New Testament Matthew tells of the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary. The child is to be called Jesus because that means "God saves." But then he remembers something from the Book of Isaiah, and he quotes it: "A young woman will be pregnant and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" -- which means, 'God with us.' " (Is. 7:14)

This name stuck. And no wonder. The most important thing about Jesus is that by reading about him, studying him, thinking of him, singing to him, trying to follow him, and as St. Paul said, allowing ourselves to have the mind of Jesus, we discover that God is with us.

Theologians talk about Jesus as the Incarnation of God. It means that God came to be with us in the flesh. He walked with us, talked with us, fed us, ate with us, healed us, felt what we feel, and, yes, became mortal and died -

- all so as to be with us all the way.

Because of this, the sacrament of Holy Communion, or The Lord's Table, is the celebration of our being accompanied by God. We will break bread together. We will share the fruit of the vine. The table is set not just for us. It is the table at which God is with us. Because God is at the table, because it is Jesus who breaks the bread and shares the cup, the table should be for us a place of great joy. Let us not be too solemn about it. Let us be happy because God is here to keep us company.



Today, I remind you, is Maundy Thursday. Today, by reading Scriptures, singing hymns, listening to words of meditation, and sharing God's table, we let our imaginations take us to the upstairs room -- a borrowed room in a big city at festival time. It was hard to find a room because the whole place was overrun with pilgrims. Jesus had told his people how to find the room and make an arrangement with its owner. Now he's there with them. Look and listen:

They have almost finished eating. The meal, like most, was only partly about food. It was mostly about being together. And it was a Passover meal, which meant it was for remembering a time of danger when God had protected the ancestors so they could escape from slavery in Egypt. But this particular Passover meal is about present danger, not just danger in the past. There's trouble straight ahead. The authorities are out to get this man Jesus, because he has been speaking truth to power. He's been giving people the idea that there is something that deserves more obedience than the state, something closer to truth than the temple. Enough such talk and you're a dead man. We need to stick together. We need Jesus. He needs us. All of us in this room need each other.

In this room, Jesus' emotions are very mixed. He loves these friends of his very much, and they've dropped everything to follow him. It fills him with gratitude. But he senses that someone here is going to betray him. It's not that Jesus is omniscient. It's just that his discernment of people is so sensitive that he can intuit what's in their heart. So he is experiencing a painful mixture of love, and gratitude, and knowing that he's about to be sold out.

So what does he do?

He gets up from the table and takes off his outer garment. Now he is bare-chested and wearing only the scant clothing of a household servant. Just like such a servant, he wraps a towel around his waist. He gets a basin and pours water into it. He puts the bowl on the ground in front of one of the disciples. Down he goes to his knees. He lifts the man's foot and washes it. Then he washes the other one.

This action is not as unfamiliar as it might be here to us, because it's the kind of thing that servants often did for household guests.

I have never forgotten a day many years ago when my wife and I were in Turkey and went to see an archaeological dig way out in the middle of nowhere. A team was unearthing a pre-historic city. Although the dig was very interesting, after many hours in the sun we got tired and parched. At last someone put us into a van and drove us to a house a few miles away that was situated in a grove of trees. The women of that house sat us down in the shade and brought basins filled with scented water, and they washed our hands and face. It made me feel like a new person. I understood that I was the recipient of Middle Eastern hospitality, and I think of it every time someone hands me a cup of tea, or a glass of water, or a sweet, or anything just to make me feel comfortable.

In Jesus' time and place there was nothing unusual about washing someone's feet. What was surprising was that it was Jesus doing it. They thought they should be HIS servants and wash HIS feet, but he had thought of it first. While they were waiting for wise words from his mouth, he gave them the loving care of his hands. Immanuel. "God is with us." He touches us.



In English we call this day **Maundy Thursday**. "Maundy" is an old, obsolete word that came from the Latin version of something Jesus said there in the Upper Room. In the Latin translation, he said, "*Mandatum novum.*" It means "New Commandment." In modern language, it means, "I am giving you a new commandment." And what was that? It was that we should love one another:

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." (John 13:34)

He calls it a new command, but of course it was not brand new. It was already there in the second of the Ten Commandments -- that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. But here Jesus stresses the mutuality of the accompanying kind of love. To be WITH people as Jesus is WITH us, we need to DO loving things for them.

So Jesus went around the room washing feet. Only Peter objected. He did what we sometimes do when we're given a gift and want to express our gratitude in a round-about way. We say, "Oh, you shouldn't!" Peter went further and said, "I won't let you do it."

But refusing a gift is not the way to let love happen. That's why Jesus says to Peter, "'Unless I wash you, you have no part of me.'" In other words, if I can't serve you our being together can't be mutual.

There used to be a popular song called "It Takes Two to Tango." It takes two or more to do accompaniment as Jesus does it. It's not a solo thing, of course, and it's not a one-way thing either. It's mutual -- like a dance. Or like something in Haiti that they call *kombit*. It's when a whole community gathers together to do a particular job because many hands make light work, and many voices make good music. So they work and sing together the whole day long.



Before I sit down, there's one more thing to say. If we Presbyterians in Colombia and the United States are serious about accompaniment, we must, like the disciples in the upper room, decide to be together in the presence of danger.

When the Accompaniment Program started among Presbyterians five years ago, many people had the idea that accompaniment ran just one way. Colombians needed accompaniment and had asked for it. People in the United States should give it. That was true, but only half true. Experience has made it clear that accompaniment is a two-way street. Colombians give it as well as receiving it. North Americans need to receive as well as to give. We need prayer and dialog and the experience of solidarity.

All is not well in the United States. One of our leading scholars has just published a book called *Ill Fares the Land*. The phrase comes from an English poet in the 19th Century, who wrote:

*Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,  
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay.*  
-- Oliver Goldsmith, *The Deserted Village* (1770)

In the United States there is great wealth, but there is also more and more poverty. The economy teeters on the edge of disaster, and our Constitutional democracy is under siege. We have too many people who are sick without doctors and too many trying to survive without jobs. We have too many people locked up in prisons. Our military is too big. The United States is becoming addicted to war. This causes physical death in places like Iraq and Afghanistan as well as Colombia. It leads to spiritual death at home.

The people of Colombia and the United States are in the same boat together, and it is leaking. We must work together if we are ever going to fix the boat. We must start right here -- in this room, at this table. Please join with me in prayer. I will use words written two years ago by The Rev. Milton Mejia:

*God of hope, who accompanies us, sustains us and encourages us. See our sadness, look at our anguish, be moved by our tears. God, hear the cry of those who have been killed, liberate the righteous, give security to our land.*

.....

*O Jesus, help us work together for the good news of peace, That as your churches we might accompany and give protection to those who suffer. We want to be a sign of solidarity and celebrate together the hope of your kingdom.*

| *In Jesus' name. Amen.*

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