

I remember my brother Les had a invisible friend growing up. Les was the youngest, with two older sisters, and he must have felt lonely, so he invented this invisible friend who went with him everywhere for several years. I remember feeling very annoyed and weary keeping up that charade, but our parents were sympathetic, so we all had to go along with it—in the car at meals. And then one day he simply outgrew the need for his invisible friend, and that was the end of it.

In the years since, I have learned that lots of kids have invisible friends, and even adults too. You know people who talk to themselves, well maybe they are not really talking to themselves at all. It would be nice to have an invisible friend, someone to go through your entire day and share every single experience. Someone to offer you constant support, companionship and help. The word companion means a person who assists, accompanies or lives with another in the capacity of a helpful friend. We all need that.

Many of you are familiar with that old Hymn “In The Garden” which was composed in 1913 by C. Austin Miles. The refrain of that Hymn describes a God who: “Walks with me and talks with me and tells me I am His own, and the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.” Most of us never have such a vivid experience of God, and if you do you shouldn’t tell anyone or you might be locked up.

Some disciples had just such an experience of Jesus after his death. They were walking to the village of Emmaus, 7 miles out of Jerusalem. Deep in conversation, they were talking about all that had happened with Jesus, when he suddenly came and walked along beside them. Of course, they could not recognize who he was initially, thinking he was a total stranger. In an odd twist of irony, they told this stranger all about Jesus, a man of God who did amazing things, how they had hoped that he was indeed the Messiah. But they were getting discouraged and unsure of the promises he had made to them. They were becoming fearful and sad, as they doubted if he was really alive after his death as he had promised. They told this stranger, “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” We had hoped. Such sadness in those words.

But there is a turning point in this encounter. As evening drew near, these two sad and weary travelers invite this stranger to stay and have supper with them, so he does. He sits down and begins to bless the bread and break it and suddenly it hits them, this is Jesus! He was the one walking with them and talking with them, he had been their companion all along. What a sense of gratitude and relief must have filled those two men. The very one they missed so much and had been longing for was already with them. This stranger was the Christ, the one whom they loved and lived with for 3 years. His promises were really true and that changed everything.

Most of the time we are like those two disciples, so caught up in our own reality and emotions that we fail to see who is walking beside us as we journey through life. Often we miss out not only on an experience of God, as I talked about last Sunday, but the companionship of Jesus Christ.

Herman Hesse's Book Journey to the East is an account of a servant named Leo who goes with a group of men on a very long journey. Leo does the most menial chores, cleaning, washing, cooking, but his presence sustains the travelers with kindness and love. The journey goes well until suddenly Leo disappears. Without this humble servant, the group falls apart and the journey is abandoned. They cannot function without their servant Leo. After many years one of the members of the party finds him living in a remote Monastery. He learns that Leo, the one they thought was a servant, was actually the Head of this Monastery, a highly respected spiritual leader. They all thought he was a common servant, when in fact he was a great leader and teacher. They could not see him clearly while they were with him, and when he was gone it was too late.

So often in our journeys through life we fail to appreciate the fellow travelers who go with us. We don't recognize them until they are gone. Fortunately for those two travelers on the road to Emmaus, Jesus became known to them before he disappeared, and with that burst of recognition, their hope was reborn. The despair, regret and grief vanished as they saw proof of the resurrection. They knew that everything he had promised was true and everything would be all right.

Jesus discreetly entered into their reality, their conversation, and met them where they were. That is what companions do—walk along beside you to help you feel less alone. They share your journey and a shared journey is a

bearable journey. They say misery loves company but that is only because company diminishes misery. The best of companions enter into our reality and stick by us. They don't care where you have come from or even where you are going, they just offer support along the way.

Nina Martin works for our United Methodist Committee on Relief, and she was in charge of organizing the recovery effort for the folks devastated by the floods in the Midwest this past summer. In trying to organize that enormous undertaking, she said something interesting. She said, "In organizing the recovery efforts, we didn't have a roadmap, but we did have a compass and a companion. She explained that in such an overwhelming recovery effort, there was so much that was uncertain and unclear, and they just had to learn as they went along. There was no simple roadmap with every detail clearly outlined. However, she said, "We had a Compass--a sense of what to do and what our mission had to be. And we knew we had a Companion along the way--God's guidance and support." A compass and a companion.

Having a belief in God does not always give us detailed guidelines for every situation in life. Instead, our faith provides us with a compass, a sense of the right thing to do in light of God's purpose, and direction. And our faith provides us with a companion, the presence of Jesus Christ, who travels with us along the way through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Even before God became human in Christ, God was there guiding the people of Israel. When Abram and Sarah were called by God to depart from their homeland and follow God into the promised land, there was no detailed roadmap for them to follow. They had to trust that God was with them along the way. They knew that they had a companion, wherever life would take them. Moses had no idea how he would lead the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt into freedom. He had killed someone, he stuttered, he felt totally inadequate. Yet he trusted that God would be with him. He traveled with a companion. And so did Joshua and Jacob and Deborah and Ruth and Naomi. And of course, so did Jesus. Jesus did not have a clear roadmap to follow. But he trusted in God. He did not always accept his destiny, even praying that the cup would pass from him. He did not know exactly what lay ahead, but he always knew that he had a divine companion along the way.

And not only did Jesus rely upon a heavenly companion, he knew he needed earthly ones. While he walked the earth Jesus needed support and friendship. While he taught, healed and ministered to thousands and thousands of people, he still needed those who would nurture him, a small group of friends and supporters. In addition to the 12 disciples he had friends like Mary, Martha, Lazarus, people he could cry with, laugh with, share the deepest concerns of his heart.

While the followers of Jesus have a companion in his living presence with us, we also need to be companions to each other. That is the heart of the Christian experience, the embodiment of God in human form. We need that for ourselves and we need to mediate it to others. None of us get through life alone, we all need help and support. That is what true Christian community represents.

You will notice some changes in our Fall schedule that we have been publicizing in our newsletter and bulletin recently. They begin next Sunday, and I am very excited about them. Some of those changes are driven by this very thing: our desire to help all of you become more deeply committed Christians through fellowship and study and support. We want to provide more opportunities for you to grow in your faith and connect with other people who share this faith journey with you. We have the promise that when two or three are gathered, the living Christ appears. As we learn together, pray together, share our faith, we grow closer to each other and to God. The Christian journey is a shared journey.

When I served the United Methodist Church in Eagle I remember a woman who came into the Sanctuary one weekday morning to pray. She was not familiar to me, but I said hello and told her to make herself at home. About two hours later I noticed that she was still there. So I went in to see if there was anything she needed. I went in and sat down on the pew next to her, and said, "I've noticed you've been here several hours, and I wondered if there is anything I could do to help you." She looked up at me, her face wet with tears, her eyes puffy from crying, and said something I will never forget. "No thank you," she said, "I am already being helped."

There is a source of tremendous help that is constantly available to us. No matter how lost and alone you might feel, please know that you really are surrounded by companions. Some are visible, and some are not but they are there to help and bless you every step of the way.

Let us pray:

Loving God: You have promised that you will be with us in spiritual ways to offer us guidance, grace, and support.. Help us to trust in you, to lean on you, to believe that you are our constant companion through this

mysterious journey we share. In gratitude for your abiding presence with us, help us to be good companions to each other and everyone in our human family. Bless our church in these days as we prepare for another season of mission and ministry this Fall. Help us to become more deeply committed Christians as we reach more people with your unconditional love. AMEN.