

Week Five
Reading

THE CARNIVAL

THE WHISPER

It's been awhile, but we observed a distinction between the wise and the foolish. The distinction is not absolute. It does not always work this way, but we know the distinction by experience. We asked a question:

How do the wise and the foolish handle information they believe to be important?

A simple thought was offered—a simple observation.

The foolish scream. The wise whisper.

Whisper?

Scripture says as much: “*The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools*” (Ecclesiastes 9:17). Wisdom has intrinsic weight that does not need volume. Foolishness needs help to be convincing. Wisdom is believed by the quality of the message. Foolishness needs the shout of the messenger. The wise, the experienced, those who truly want *life*, learn to listen for quiet words of wisdom calling out to them through the carnival of chaos.

Deeper insight into this will lead us to our fourth imperative.

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The young boy stands in the midst of the carnival's chaos. A bag of cotton candy dangles from one hand; a string of tickets dangles from the other. Prospective thrills beckon him to every stand, every ride, and every game. His eyes are wide with excitement. He races through the maze of people. His time is limited. He doesn't want to miss a bit of it.

He tosses rings at the ring toss. He hopes to win a bear. Close, but not quite.

He races to the merry-go-round. He hopes to ride the blue one. Purple will do.

He throws balls to dunk the clown. Three balls per ticket. Four tickets burned.

The carnival is fun. The carnival is frustrating.

The fun drives him on. The frustration leaves him lonely. As he races to the next thrill, the next experience, he hears a voice cutting through the chaos.

He stops. He turns. He wonders.

The voice is familiar. The voice is wanted. It wasn't wanted at first. At first he wanted to run free, to run alone. The reality of the carnival changed all that. Now he welcomes the voice. Now he wants the

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voice. He can't quite place the direction, but he hears it again. To his frustration, blaring bells from a ride beside him drown the voice out.

Where is he? Was that him? I think it was him.

He turns. He looks. He wishes. He wants.

Through the crowd before him, he thinks he catches a glimpse of him. The crowd shifts, and his view is obstructed.

Was that him? I think it was him. It could have been him.

He runs. He runs some more. He stops. He listens.

Upon stopping, upon listening, upon waiting, rather than the hundreds of voices around him, rather than the clanging bells and beckoning voices, he listens to the one familiar voice calling his name.

It is not loud; it need not be.

It's a trusted voice that cuts through the chaos.

To his surprise, to his relief, to his delight, he does not discover the voice by running to the distant corners of the carnival. The voice is not found in the shifting crowd.

The voice is found as the boy stops and listens.

He pauses. He does not run.

He simply looks to the towering presence standing calmly right beside him.

There he is. That's my dad!

THE CONSTANT PRESENCE

A familiar voice is powerful. It need not be the loudest voice in the room or scream for attention. Yes, the voice must be heard, but familiarity beats volume. The wise know this, and rather than listen for volume, they listen for the quiet ping of truth in that familiar voice they've grown to recognize: "My sheep listen to my voice. I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27).

When Christ physically walked this earth, there was a critical moment when he pulled his closest followers aside. The cross was imminent. In a matter of days, circumstances would change dramatically. These followers had lived closely with Jesus for several years. They walked side by side; they shared meals; they slept in the same fields, the same rooms. They knew each other well. They had the high privilege of literally living and walking with the Son of God. Which makes one of Christ's final statements to them either desperately odd or powerfully intriguing.

Christ said, "It is for your good that I am going away" (John 16:7).

Good? What could be better than having the face-to-face interaction they had with Christ every day? If they had questions, they turned and asked him. If they were sick, they could walk across the room and experience his touch. If they were confused, they could address him. He was right there with them. What could be better than that? How could it be *good* that he would be leaving them?

"Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7).

Without question, this must have caused confusion.

What counselor? If you're sending someone else, most certainly this counselor can't be better than you. How can it be good to get this counselor? You seem to be implying that this will be a better situation than the one we have right now. That's not possible.

As stunning as that sounds, that is precisely what Christ was saying. He would leave, and his leaving would be good because having the Counselor present would be better for them than his own physical presence. It would take time for his closest followers to be convinced that this new situation could be truly better, and certainly, there was a richness to the physical presence of Christ. In time, though, they would discover what we can still discover today: A spiritual presence is a constant presence not limited by physical realities.

When Christ walked closely with his followers, he would also have times of absence. He was a physical being and willingly limited himself by this. Scripture describes times when, to his disciples' frustration, he slipped away: *"Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: 'Everyone is looking for you!'"* (Mark 1:36-37). Such is the reality of the physical world.

The Counselor would be Spirit.

After the cross and after the resurrection, Christ again met with his followers. Prior to his ascension, he made a statement that, here again, must have sounded odd at first. Later they would look back on this statement and piece it together. He tells them, very simply, *"I am with you always, to the very end of the age"* (Matthew 28:20). This Jesus, this being who died and then rose, now promises his perpetual presence. But was he not the promise for the Counselor? The Counselor would be the one who would be present? How is Christ to be present until *the very end of the age*?

We do not know the extent of his disciples understanding at this point, but in time, they would see it clearly. This Counselor, this ever-present Spirit, would later be referred to as *the "Spirit of Jesus."* In one such place, an early follower of Christ wrote, *"I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what happened to me will turn out for my deliverance"* (Philippians 1:18-19). So the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, is referred to as *"the Spirit of Jesus Christ."* Is it any wonder then that Christ himself would have said, *"It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you"* (John 16:7). A presence would become far more effective than the physical presence of Christ. It would be the spiritual presence of Christ, and it is this spiritual presence that allows him to promise, *"I am with you always, to the very end of the age"* (Matthew 28:20).

The young boy at the carnival is not emboldened by finding detailed instructions on how to navigate the carnival. He did not find a map, or list of rules, or instructions for the games and rides. He is not inspired by an arrow on a sign telling him where to go next. He is not relieved to just have guidance for the games. Boldness for his battle is embodied in a person. His strength is in the presence of a person stronger, wiser, and more experienced than himself. Release from his fear comes when his father, leaning down, whispers, *"I'll stay close. Stay close to me. We'll do this together."* The child's great joy at the carnival, the memory he will savor most as he ages in life, will not just be the carnival itself, but the person with whom he experienced the carnival.

And so it is with the Spirit of Jesus.

Christ says, *"Remain in me, and I will remain in you"* (John 15:4).

Translation: *"I'll stay close. Stay close to me. We'll do this together."*

Christ says, *"But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth"* (John 16:13).

Translation: *"I'll stay close. Stay close to me. We'll do this together."*

Christ says, *"I am with you always, to the very end of the age"* (Matthew 28:20).

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Translation: *“I’ll stay close. Stay close to me. We’ll do this together.”*

Christ says, *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you”* (Acts 1:8).

Translation: *“I’ll stay close. Stay close to me. We’ll do this together.”*

Scripture states, *“We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us”* (1 Corinthians 2:12).

Translation: *“I’ll stay close. Stay close to me. We’ll do this together.”*

Scripture states, *“Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit”* (Galatians 5:25).

Translation: *“I’ll stay close. Stay close to me. We’ll do this together.”*

The message is not isolated. It is pervasive.

THE IMPERATIVES

God’s method is not to just download Scripture to our mental hard drive, sit back, fold his arms, and wonder if we’ll make the cut. Rather, he comes within us, he strengthens us, he leads us, and he interacts with us. He wants to do this life, this carnival, together. Like the young child, we are not emboldened by just finding detailed instructions on how to navigate the carnival. We have not just found a map, or list of rules, or instructions for the games and rides. We are not inspired by an arrow on a sign telling us where to go next. We are not relieved to just have guidance for the games. Boldness for our battle is embodied in a person. Our strength is in the presence of a person stronger, wiser, and more experienced than ourselves. Release from our fear comes when God’s presence leans down and whispers, *“I’ll stay close. Stay close to me. We’ll do this together.”* And here as well, our great joy at the carnival, the memory we will savor for all eternity, will not just be the carnival itself, but the person with whom we experienced the carnival.

Which leads to our fourth imperative.

I must recognize the real me.

I must fight for my life.

I must trust.

And a fourth imperative:

I must walk by God’s Spirit.

If we are to authentically love God, if we are to experience God in our daily lives, if this journey is not just an exercise of the intellect but a calling to a way of life, then we must, we absolutely must, listen for the voice of truth calling through the carnival of chaos. There’s something powerful in this. We know it and sense it. If this is truly possible, we want the experience in our daily lives. For most, the question is not desire, but practice. How does this work? How do we truly live by the Spirit? What must we do? How do we experience God’s presence? How do we hear God’s voice? Much could be said to these questions. Let’s get after the essentials.

THE PERSONALITY OF CHRIST

As a starting point, we must recognize that this Spirit is not an inanimate *force* or *energy* in the universe, but a personality. Yes, it has force. Yes, it has energy. But, *it* is not an *“it”*; *it* is a *person*. The

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implications of this are profound. We are not just pulled along by a colossal magnet. The Spirit of Jesus is not a cosmic hit of supercharged caffeine. We are inspired and strengthened by the presence of a powerful and personal being with emotion, perspective, and presence. This Spirit “*searches all things, even the deep things of God*” (1 Corinthians 2:10). This Spirit “*helps us in our weakness*” (Romans 8:26). This Spirit “*prays for God’s people in accordance with God’s will*” (Romans 8:27). This is a living personality that interacts and intercedes.

One of the more fascinating statements on this comes from a man who walked with Jesus physically. John was one of Christ’s closest followers. He is referred to as “*the disciple whom Jesus loved*” (John 13:23). Without question, this was a man who would have treasured the physical presence of Jesus. He sat with him at dinner. He walked with him, and later, along with the other disciples, he is referred to as Christ’s friend (John 15:15). This man knew Jesus well.

Years later, John writes to followers of Christ who did not experience Christ’s physical presence. He draws attention to the physical experience he and others were fortunate enough to have when he writes that Christ is the one “*whom we have heard, whom we have seen with our eyes, whom we have looked at and our hands have touched*” (1 John 1:1). Why would he do this? Will his readers hear him say, “*You missed him! He was here, and you missed him! Let me tell you what he was like, since you missed him!*”? We might expect this. It’s the kind of gloating common in our world. John does something quite surprising though.

When John writes, he writes with a stated purpose. So as to be certain nobody misses this, he tells them plainly that his purpose in writing is to “*proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ*” (1 John 1:3-4).

You catch that? It’s stunning!

John writes about what was “*seen and heard*” (the physical presence of Christ), so that “*you also may have fellowship with us*” (the spiritual presence of Christ). So as to be certain there is no mistaking what he means by this fellowship, he describes it in detail: “*Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.*”

John does not write to speak of a fellowship that came and went. He does not acknowledge experiencing Christ physically to underscore what he experienced and all others now miss. Rather, he writes out of passion for his *current* experience of Christ. He wants others to experience him, too. He’s tasted of this fellowship, and he wants his readers, us, to know and experience what he continues to experience. His fellowship is an ongoing fellowship. He’s so passionate that we too experience this that he tells us next, “*We write this to make our joy complete*” (1 John 1:4). It’s as if he’s saying, “*Yes, I experienced him, but so can you! You must know this! It’s not too late! You didn’t miss him! He’s still here and longs to fellowship with you! We are called not just to a set of principles to live by, but to a fellowship. We are called to relate to a being, a person, who once walked physically and now offers his perpetual presence spiritually.*”

All this enhances the “*How?*” question. If there is a spiritual fellowship available to us, how do we recognize this fellowship? How do we discern the voice of God? God may call us through the carnival of chaos, he may walk beside us, but how are we to recognize God’s voice through the many competing voices that surround us? How do we know it’s God?

THE PRESENCE IS NOT SEEN

In speaking of our interaction with God, Scripture tells us, “*Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known*” (1

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Corinthians 13:12). If interaction with the Spirit of God seems simultaneously real and mysterious, then the experience is an accurate reflection of the experience described by Scripture. This could be misunderstood. Scripture does not tell us to set a low expectation of our experience with God and minimize his presence in our lives. That's a misreading of Scripture. Rather, the experience of God's presence can be both powerful and profound; his presence impacts us in both known and unknown ways. But if we have a physical expectation rather than a spiritual expectation, we may very well turn a deaf ear to the familiar voice standing right beside us and calling us in the midst of the carnival's chaos. We may be wishing and waiting for something that's already there.

The young child at the carnival knows his father's voice because it is a voice he has heard countless times. He recognizes the voice in the midst of hundreds of competing calls because this is a voice he has heard for years. It is at this place where we lean into our experience with Scripture. Why listen to God's voice in Scripture? Scripture trains the ears. The person who trains his ears by hearing God's voice through Scripture is much more capable of hearing God's voice in his or her life experiences. In the midst of the carnival's chaos, the young boy may hear the booming voice of another grown man. The pitch may be similar. It may get his attention for a brief moment, but very quickly he will dismiss it. *"That's not my dad...that's not what he sounds like."* To experience the presence of God in our daily lives, we must be trained by the presence of God in Scripture. Scripture familiarizes us with the kinds of things God says and does. We may not yet experience him face to face. We may be in a season where we *"know in part,"* but through Scripture we are also given example after example, life after life, story after story, familiarizing us with the heart and passion of God.

Consider the early follower of Christ already mentioned—John. His spiritual experience of Christ was no doubt enhanced by his physical experience of Christ. How was he to recognize the spiritual presence of God in his life? Without question, having experienced Christ physically trained him to recognize Christ spiritually. What's true for John is true for us. Scripture trains us. We begin to recognize the kinds of things God says and does. Without training our ears with Scripture, we will project God's presence and voice on any inclination believing what we want to believe. Such living is misguided and dangerous.

Which leads to another area of importance.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY

If familiarity with the presence and voice of God is acquired and trained, it is critical that we surround ourselves with others who are also experiencing the presence of God. Their presence and their experience serve the incredibly important purpose of balancing and refining our own experience. *"Yes!"* the friend says, *"I affirm what you're sensing. I, too, am convinced God is doing that in your life."* Or *"Slow down, good friend, I see why you may think that, but I sense caution; you may be a few steps ahead or a few steps behind God at this point."* Scripture puts an incredibly high premium on the collective agreement of God's people. It goes as far as saying, *"That if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them"* (Matthew 18:19-20). This statement is not intended to be a blank check given to any two believers, but among other things, it points us to an essential aspect of Christian friendship. Two or three followers of Christ will refine each other, purify each other's understanding of God's presence in their lives, and their going before God together will be greater than the assumptions they may take alone.

There's more...

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THE IMPORTANCE OF PAUSING

The carnival of chaos bellows with confusion. Confusion often breeds more confusion. Noise often breeds greater noise. Chaos often breeds amplified chaos. Speed often breeds increased speed. Which leads to another critical aspect of living by God's Spirit.

We must pause.

We must stop.

We must stand in the midst of the chaos and listen.

Proverbs reminds us, *"It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way"* (Proverbs 19:2). Psalms reminds us to *"cease striving and know that I am God"* (Psalm 46:10, NASB). Ecclesiastes tells us to *"not be quick with your mouth, nor hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few"* (Ecclesiastes 5:2). Yes, there is a time and a place to kick it into high gear, but when that time is *all the time*, and when that place is *every place*, we run the dangerous risk of getting swept into the chaos of the carnival rather than experiencing God's presence in the midst of the swirling realities that surround us. Just as the young boy finally discovered the voice of his father right beside him when he stopped running from one end to the other, we too will establish greater awareness as we cultivate a contented spirit with ears tuned to hear God's voice. God can and will speak in any moment, and many of these moments can and will be as we move swiftly through life. But even as we at times must move with external haste, this does not mean our internal person must match the runaway momentum of circumstances. As mentioned, the wise and spiritual *"cease striving and know that God is God"* (Psalm 46:10).

GUARD YOUR HEART

The young boy and his father begin to walk. The chaos swirls around them, but the cadence of the boy's steps now matches the long but adjusted strides of his father. While once the boy was running frantically to and fro, now he walks with steady intention. The father gently guides him. In one place, he affirms the son's excitement for the thrill of one of the rides. In another place, he encourages the son to step out anyway, even though the boy is scared. In still another, the father encourages the son to wait. A few more inches of growth will give him what he needs for that one. Through it all, the son experiences a critical lesson: To make the most of the carnival, it's best to walk with his father.

Scripture puts it like this...

Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:25).

Through Scripture, through community, through quiet and thoughtful listening, the Spirit of Jesus will make his presence known. At times we will be propelled forward, even though greater comfort is behind us. At other times we will be held back, even though excitement appears to be in front of us. There will be moments it all makes sense. We'll know danger and rebellion are on the other side of that door. And, of course, there will be times it doesn't make sense, and we'll wonder and question why we can't do that or have that.

Through it all, one thing is certain: God will become greater through our experience of his presence. We will cultivate greater love for God and greater enjoyment of God's gifts by keeping in step with his Spirit. It will be when we break from his gentle but decisive strides that we grope and gripe over the gifts and strain to turn them into gods. We will want them to be *IT*, but they are not *IT*. They are *it*. They are gifts to be enjoyed. They are designed to inspire our hearts to the one who is greater and grander than our hearts could ever dream. For we were created with eternity in our hearts and only

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The Eternal can satisfy this eternal longing. Above all else, we must guard this heart by letting it feast on the greatest and grandest of all.

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