

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 19 March 2023
Fourth Sunday in Lent - Year A

1st Reading: *1 Samuel 16:1-13*

Psalm: 23

2nd Reading: *Ephesians 5:8-14*

Gospel: *John 9:1-41*

Sermon - Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø

In the name of the Father, ✚ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

OK, we're going to go back to school again today, but don't worry, there won't be any pop quizzes this time. We're just going to take attendance. So let's see: Jim Swain - present. Willie Kayser - present. Michelle Andrews - present. Janis Kurth - present. Anna Anderson - present. Um... Jesus Christ - well, I hope you would all agree with me that Jesus is present here among us, although I expect that there are many times when we wonder if he may be absent: When things in our lives aren't going very well and we ask, "Where is God?", or maybe things are going *too* well and we forget how dependent we are on God. Or we are feeling especially lonely and even God seems far from us.

Our readings today use a number of different images to remind us how God is with us - with us in history, with us in creation, with us in the words and deeds of Jesus that have been recorded for us in the Gospels, with us in wonderful and surprising ways to shepherd us when we are in need and to give us light when we are in darkness.

David was certainly aware of God's presence with him when he was shepherding his father's sheep, and later when he was shepherding the people of Israel as their king - so much so that he drew on his own experiences when he wrote the 23rd Psalm, acknowledging that the Lord was *his* shepherd, and he understood what that meant.

It is fitting that we should be reading this Psalm today during this week when we remembered the founding of this church many years ago, which came to be called Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, and we have that very comforting picture of Jesus present among us as our Good Shepherd, holding us in his arms and leading us beside still waters.

In our New Testament readings today, the imagery shifts from shepherding to light. We were in darkness, unaware of God's presence, but Jesus brings light and makes the blind to see that light. Jesus tells us: "I came into this world so that those who do not see may see." And so in Jesus we see that God is present - present most especially in his crucifixion and resurrection - present to us in the bread and wine we will eat and drink in communion with him - and present in our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

In a few minutes we will sing a very beautiful Celtic hymn: *Be Thou My Vision*. The first verse goes like this:

Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that thou art:
Thou my best thought both by day and by night,
Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

The Celtic Christians were very much aware of the presence of Christ.

This particular hymn was written probably in the 8th Century in Ireland following in the footsteps of Saint Patrick, whose feast we celebrated on Friday, and it draws on another hymn - this one attributed to Patrick himself - *I Bind Unto Myself Today* - in which we, along with Patrick, surround ourselves with our awareness of the presence of God:

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.

Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

Coral and I just finished reading a book of meditations on this hymn written by David Adam, who was for a long time the pastor of Lindisfarne, also known as Holy Island. We did meet him once on Lindisfarne, and had a nice chat with him. And one of the things he emphasised in this book was just how much the Celtic saints were aware of the presence of God, especially in that wild and windswept land on the border between England and Scotland with which we became so familiar.

And now we are starting a new book by David Adam, this one about the life of Saint Cuthbert, whose feast day is tomorrow, who was one of the first bishops of Lindisfarne, and who is entombed at Durham Cathedral, where we were privileged to be members for several years. Cuthbert, too, was keenly aware of Christ's presence with him throughout his life in that untamed land of Northumbria, which he shared with the beasts and birds of that region. One story about Cuthbert tells of how he would immerse himself in God's creation, by wading into the very cold North Sea, up to waist, and would stand there praying all night. Then, when he came ashore in the morning, otters would come and swirl around his legs and feet to dry them.

We, too, can take something from these Celtic saints and feel God's presence with us in and through his creation. This doesn't mean that we worship nature, or worship a God who is only the creator and nothing else. As the words of the Celtic hymns show us, Patrick, Cuthbert, and the other Celtic saints saw the light of *Christ* in the world around them - the Christ who lived, gave sight to the blind, was crucified, and rose from the dead, and who in David Adam's words has thus been set free to be in every part of his creation.

So yes, we can mark Jesus Christ as present with us here today, with each of us as in him we live and move and have our being: the Good Shepherd who leads us beside still waters, or the cold North Sea, who brings light to our darkness and restores our soul, and who gives us goodness and mercy all the days of our lives.

Amen!

Copyright © 2023 - Thomas J. Mosbø