

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Glen Bengson

RCL: 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41 LM: 1 Samuel 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a; Psalm 23:1-3a, 3b-4, 5, 6; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41 or 9:1, 6-9, 13-17, 34-38

The passage from 1 Samuel tells of Samuel anointing David as the king of Israel, succeeding Saul. Anointing with oil evokes rich images from the Scriptures and in Christian faith. Anointing is a way to officially recognize a person's authority as king, priest, or prophet. It is a sign of God's healing power and is part of the historic baptismal rite, a sign of the Spirit working in the newly baptized person. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, literally "the anointed one." As Christ is acknowledged as "King," healing is brought to those in distress, people are welcomed into the fellowship of the church, and the justice of God is prophetically proclaimed.

Psalm 23 continues the theme: "The Lord is my shepherd . . . he anoints my head with oil." Images of being chosen, of healing, and of hospitality come to mind. When the psalmist continues, "You prepare a table before me, in the presence of my enemies," we see a God who provides under the most difficult circumstances, who desires that enemies be reconciled and strangers welcomed. The Middle Eastern custom of hospitality, shared by many cultures, is to welcome all visitors and to break bread with both friend and stranger. Jesus' ministry centers on table fellowship with outcasts, sinners, and those rejected by others. His ministry images the kingdom of God, when friends and enemies are gathered into one at the great banquet of eternity, reconciled and at peace. Is this what our church communion celebrations, our family meals, our potluck suppers, and our national and international food policies proclaim?

Many churches host meals during the week; all are invited. Our church hosts "The Caring Place," a ministry of all the churches in our small Ohio town. Each Thursday evening a different church prepares a meal, brings it to the church and, with other volunteers, serves the guests. The guests don't have to go through a line but are served at their table. They can have as much as they want. There is good talk and fellowship, and children have a special place. It is one way that we believe the Good Shepherd "prepares a table" for those he has anointed with his love and with whom he desires to share in the heavenly banquet. How can it be extended to embrace the whole world of God's creating and loving care? Perhaps through our denominational hunger relief and development programs, through evangelism outreach in our local communities, and through prophetic words to our governmental leaders, advocating governance that images that of the Anointed One, caring for all his flock, leading them to green pastures, by still waters, and to the table of the kingdom.

John's Gospel tells the story of the man born blind, whom Jesus heals and whose situation provokes a great discussion about sin and salvation. The authorities want to blame the victim and his family: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (v. 2). How reminiscent of our own day, as those in poverty, hungry and homeless people, and others in need of healing in their lives are denied help or receive the most limited assistance because others blame them for conditions beyond their control. While all people certainly have a

measure of personal responsibility in any situation, we know, as did Jesus, that there are structural and natural forces at work that call for a societal response. Jesus rejects the “blame game,” instead declaring that human needs become the opportunity to reveal God’s work of mercy and healing. Jesus identifies himself as the one who comes to bear witness to that mercy, to be “the light of the world” in this case.

The story is told of the wise teacher who asks his students, “How can one tell when night has given way to the day?” The students propose answers focused on discerning the physical evidence of light versus darkness, trying to define what constitutes “dawn,” but none of the answers receive the teacher’s approval. Finally they ask their teacher for the correct answer. “Night becomes day,” he says, “when you see in the face of the stranger your brother or sister.” The light of Christ reveals that we are all one in the grace of God and related to one another, not out of our own choosing, but by being created in God’s image and redeemed in Christ.

Children’s Time

Today’s periscope from Ephesians evokes the images of darkness and light. One song that everyone can sing is “This Little Light of Mine,” encouraging us to “let it shine” in witness to the Light of the World. Younger children enjoy singing this with the accompanying hand motions and could lead the whole congregation in remembering their vocation as enlightened children of God. The experience is the message. It could be complemented by all holding candles, gathering around the baptismal font, or in procession. A verse connected to baptism is “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:16). It might even make an effective closing to worship, signifying the church going out into the world bearing the light of Christ. How can we bring the light of Christ to others? By recognizing that it is Christ’s light and Christ’s healing that we have received and can now share.

Musical Suggestions

God, Whose Almighty Word (Let there be light!)—LBW 400 The King of Love My Shepherd Is—LBW 456 Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound—LBW 448 (also BP 105) I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light—WOV 649 We are Marching in the Light of God (Siyahamba)—WOV 650 Shine, Jesus, Shine—WOV 651 Word of God, Come Down on Earth—WOV 716 Healer of Our Every Ill—WOV 738 Be Thou My Vision—WOV 776 (also BP 99) Lord Jesus, If I Love and Serve My Neighbor—BP 95
The Lord Hears the Cry of the Poor—BP 109 All Who Love and Serve Your City—BP 165