

## ON THE WAY

### Pentecost 3, Year B: 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Mark 4:26-34

One of the gifts of our cranberry-coloured book, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, is its large variety of Prayers at the Table. Yes, we have prayed Prayer IV, it seems, for a very long time – from Ash Wednesday to the Day of Pentecost, to be precise – but now that we enter the Time of the Church or Ordinary Time, that season of the church year bounded by the Day of Pentecost and the first Sunday of Advent, we can choose prayers that make connections with our readings for the day or with the themes of the season; we can choose old prayers or new prayers; prayers that contain call-and-response; prayers that are virtual monologues; short prayers, long prayers, prayers that challenge us with their oblique references to Holy Scripture, and prayers that echo the Christian orthodoxy which stands at the heart of Lutheran worship – prayers that are chicken soup for the Lutheran soul.

Last Sunday and this Sunday, we pray one of those challenging prayers, a prayer that gives us a bird's-eye-view of Holy Scripture, rather than making direct references to specific stories in the Bible. And its strength is how it describes God's intimate relationship with creation, including us, and how it reinforces God's real presence/Christ's real presence with us. The first petition signals the author's fresh approach as it reworks the first two chapters of Genesis: "Holy God,...the universe declares your praise beyond the stars, beneath the sea, within each cell, with every breath." As we pray, God is proclaimed as both transcendent – above and beyond us - and immanent – as close as our cell structure, as near as our next breath.

I love this prayer; but the phrase that always touches the tender place of faith for me is "on the way". The reference is to Jesus' ministry of healing, teaching, and preaching, the years he spent with his disciples and the crowds that followed him as he made his way around the countryside of Palestine, eventually, of course, entering Jerusalem. It touches me, because it proclaims how the grace and love of God in Christ Jesus are always on the move; how they are not that locatable for those whose great joy is being definitive concerning grace and love. But "on the way" also suggests that the grace and love of God in Christ Jesus might be where we already are; that Christ's real presence travels with us in the grace and love and power of the gospel. "[We remember] his love for us on the way, at the table, and to the end," we pray; and in those few words, I understand how the Spirit of the Risen Christ is present in my life and in our life together as those who are gathered by water and word, bread and wine.

In Samuel's life, we see an understanding of God that was perhaps earlier ritualized in the people of Israel carrying the covenant box, the ark of the covenant, with them wherever they wandered in the wilderness, pitching over it the tent of the presence whenever they stopped, but certainly the idea of a God who travelled with Abraham, Sarah, and their retinue all over the Mideast, into Egypt and back, and then remained with Isaac and Jacob, Jacob's family, and even with Joseph when he was separated from his family in Egypt is a distinguishing characteristic of the God of Israel. Other deities were not peripatetic! Wherever the people of Israel are, there also is the God of Israel. "Generations bless your faithfulness: through the water; by night and day; across the wilderness; out of exile; into the future."

And so, as Samuel steps forward in today's First Reading to leave Saul and receive divine guidance in the selection of Saul's successor as king of Israel, we overhear a conversation between Samuel and the Lord. Through their conversation, we learn much about Samuel's resistance to change and his reluctance to do God's bidding. We can't help wondering is Samuel the best God could find to finesse the regime change in Israel. But the account tells us that Samuel is not without accompaniment. The Lord has conversation with Samuel in Ramah, in Bethlehem when Samuel anoints David, Jesse's youngest son, to become Saul's successor, and "on the way".

I don't know how this reading and readings like this are heard by Jews, but my guess is that the purpose of passages like this is instructional, rather than anecdotal or even historical; that for as good a story as is provided in the life and times of Samuel and the God of Israel, the greater value might be in teaching people something about the intimacy and real presence of God in the lives of people who are quite ordinary and not particularly gifted in understanding the ways of God. Samuel has more rough edges than smooth ones, it seems, and we have no trouble putting ourselves in his sandals. But through the divine nudge toward Bethlehem and eventually toward Jesse's youngest son, David, and in Samuel's lack

of eagerness in carrying out the will of God, we gain a deeper understanding of how God is “on the way.” In other words, when we decline God’s call to love and serve our neighbour, when we shrug at injustice and dismiss the significance of our contribution to righting a wrong or healing a hurt, God in powerful word and gracious gospel is still “on the way” with us.

And it is perhaps this truth that Jesus describes in his two parables of the kingdom from today’s reading from Mark. “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how...The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

The unexpected happens because grace is present with us and for us throughout our journey in faith, through all the days of our discipleship. We are so like Samuel, but we can do great things as a congregation, as a church, as a member church of the Lutheran World Federation, as a member church of the Canadian Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches – not because we have smooth edges and love God above all things, but rather because God is “on the way” with us, calling us, nudging us, leading us, accompanying us, praying in us to become workers in the kingdom.

“Blessing, praise, and thanks to you, holy God, *through* Christ Jesus, *by* your Spirit, *in* your church, *without end.*”

On the way.