

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, 19 March 2023 Laetare Sunday

Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR

The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector

In the Name of God's Christ, Bread for the life of the world. Amen.

Welcome to Laetare Sunday, or Rejoice Sunday. This is the Sunday midway through the wilderness time of Lent when the penitential purple can be lightened to lavender or pink, when a few flowers or berries are allowed among the altar greens, when the music can be a bit more bright.

It is also the Sunday of Bread for the Journey, a kind a way station for refreshment in the midst of our journey, full of reminders that Jesus is our bread, the bread that gives life to the world so that we are always sustained, no matter how bleak or challenging our circumstances. It is a Sunday full of promise that we will make it through to the Paschal Feast, through the wilderness to the resurrection and life with God that we were created for and called to. It is a Sunday of hope.

Our readings are meant to help us see and hold onto that hope and nourishment.

The story of David's anointing reminds us of how God so often calls us to do unexpected and sometimes dangerous things, that what God calls us to may not make sense to us. Most of us have experience of these unlikely calls. Samuel knows that he is risking his life going out to anoint a potential new king, since the current king, Saul, would not hesitate to kill him – but he goes and finds that God has very strange ideas about who should be king. Samuel has long experience trusting God and so is able to follow through and carry out his mission. He knows that God is with him, whatever the outcome.

The 23rd Psalm is the best known and best loved of all the psalms, and therefore the one most often requested in hospitals, on deathbeds, and at funerals. Of all biblical texts only the Lord's Prayer is better known. Like the Lord's Prayer, it reminds us of the loving care of God, of the sustenance and love we are continually offered no matter what our life circumstances. This is a Sunday when we are invited to remember that, remember what we have always known – that we dwell in God's house all the days of our lives. That is why a lot of us know it in the very old King James translation which we read together today. It is old and deep in our tradition and our hearts.

Then the brief reading from Ephesians reminds us that we are children of light, another way of saying that we are God's own, nurtured and cared for always, living in love and shining with that love.

This all sets us up for another of John's long, involved narratives. It begins with a simple healing. We have trouble believing in miracles, believing in God's loving care, and so we say really stupid things – like 'Was he really blind?' 'Is he just someone who looks like the blind beggar?' When we read the story, it is important to remember that all of the people in the story are God's Chosen People, people brought up to see and know God, to trust God and expect God's love and care – and all of them, except the man who receives the healing and his parents, are responding inappropriately. These are the people who have lived as God's Chosen for centuries, through slavery and rescue, through victories and defeats, through exile and return, always seeking to live as the people of God, to understand God. It is not easy. Suspicion and distrust seem to come more easily to us than trust. And distrust damages gratitude and love. We are meant to identify with them, to see ourselves in them.

Instead of rejoicing at the blind beggar's healing, people find all kinds of reasons not to believe in it. We all do this – react with suspicion when something seems 'too good to be true.' John is showing us how even people who spend their lives steeped in worship and the tradition of God's loving care have trouble trusting, finding it easier to be suspicious, to protect themselves from being deceived by a false miracle, than to respond with wonder and gratitude. It takes work to keep our eyes and hearts open to the love of God all around us, to live in the trusting attitude of the 23rd Psalm.

In the midst of all those suspicious people, people who should know better, but instead protect themselves with cynicism and self-righteousness, is the man with nothing to lose. The man was born blind and so it was known since his birth that the only way he would be able to feed himself would be as a beggar at the gate. People were expected to give to the beggars so that they would be able to sustain themselves. When Jesus gives him his sight, he is filled with gratitude and is open to learning. Just as last week with the woman of Samaria, Jesus tells the grateful and curious man who he is. Jesus is there for everyone to see, but only those with open and grateful hearts, who are not protecting themselves with cynicism and self-righteousness, are able to recognize him and accept his gifts.

I was pleased to find that this year the 23rd psalm comes on the Sunday close to Saint Patrick's Day, because his stories about life alone on the hillside with just sheep and dogs and God has always been dear to my heart.

Patrick grew up in Roman Britain in a Christian family. His father was a deacon and his grandfather a priest, but by his own account the faith meant little to him. As a youth, he just accepted life as it came and expected things to continue comfortably – until he was kidnapped and sold into slavery across a stretch of sea from everyone and everything he had ever known.

The man who bought Patrick set the youth off alone to care for his sheep. So there was teenage Patrick on a green Irish hillside with no company but sheep and dogs. He could have become bitter and angry. He could have despaired and gone mad. But he found in that solitude the opportunity to learn to converse with God. God became real to the youth in a way he had not experienced previously. He remembered all that he had been taught, but never thought much about. He observed the beauty and magic of the natural world around him. He took solace in the company of the herding dogs and the sheep who needed his guidance and protection.

Patrick put his whole trust in God, and was grateful for all of the gifts in his unexpected situation. It was a choice. He could have chosen despair and resentment. But because he was grateful, his gratitude opened his eyes to see all that was wonderful around him. Because he developed a solid trust in God, he was able to do amazing things, to thrive in drastic situations.

After several years alone with God, the sheep, and the dogs, Patrick was called forth. The relationship he had developed with God enabled him to trust the call he received in a dream – to head to the sea, a 200-mile walk from his hillside, and find passage on a ship. Eventually he made his way home to his family, rejoicing in their reunion, expecting to settle back into his former life and remain with them always. But he was called again. Grateful for his family and his home, Patrick still trusted in God's guidance and went off to study to become a priest and eventually a bishop so that he could return to the land of his enslavement, as God's gift to the Irish people.

Without that fabric of gratitude for all the gifts in every stage of his life, and trust in God no matter what the circumstances, Patrick would have been afraid to go back to a land he knew to be filled with violence, a land where he was legally another man's property. But he went with joy. And his joy and trust and gratitude were contagious. He shared his faith with so many that the contagion spread across the land, with monasteries and churches sprouting up all over. Many times Patrick's life was threatened, but his trust in God, and gratitude for life and opportunity kept him from fear, enabled him to do what was needed, without worrying about himself.

Patrick is a perfect saint for this Sunday when we pause in the wilderness and look around to see the boundless love of God and the sustenance God offers us in Christ, the bread of life for us and for the world.

Let us pray. Gracious God, of life and love and hope, grant us always to know that you are with us, sustaining us, even in the valley of the shadow of death; grant us grateful hearts to accept your gifts and share them with others following the example of Patrick and all your saints. Amen.