

“God Is In: Celebrating the Sacred Presence”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden
for First UMC, Grand Junction, Sunday, August 16, 2020

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ
website: www.fumcgj.org/sermons-2/

Scripture Texts:

Psalm 139:1-6; Matthew 28:20b [NLT]

OPENING – The Scripture Texts

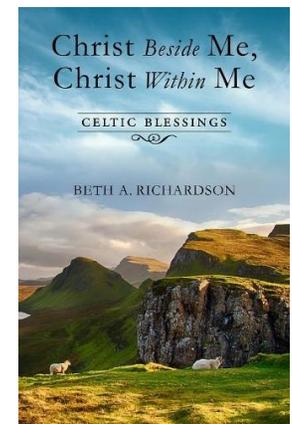
- (*Unpack the juxtaposition of the Scripture texts: One from “our” perspective, the other from God’s. There’s a beautiful interconnectedness there, where the one perspective reinforces the other and is reinforced by the other.*)
- I can’t think of a passage of Scripture that expresses the intimacy of God’s knowledge of a person any better than Psalm 139. (*Unpack this, referring to the verses that follow vv. 1-6, as well.*)
 - It’s not a declaratory statement, Psalm 139: A statement of fact, if you will, equally applicable to all persons. It’s David’s exuberant expression of praise at being known so intimately by God. It’s something he finds great comfort in.
 - But, as I asked the high school students at Summer Camp last year, do you? That is –
 - ✓ Is God’s complete and unfiltered knowledge of you comforting to you? Or, is it threatening?

- ✓ Is God – is Jesus – so nonjudgmental that you feel OK being known so well?
 - ✓ Can you give yourself honestly to that level of intimacy without any concern? Or does that make you just a little uneasy?
- We might ask the same questions of Jesus’ promise to be with us always, even to the end of the age.
- ✓ If we see Jesus as being “for us” (Rom. 8:31), this is good news.
 - ✓ But do we? Would Jesus approve of all of our choices, points of view, priorities, values, etc.? If He would not, what is it about His being with us always that is reassuring for us? Isn’t it that He IS for us?! He is for our transformation into more and more of His likeness, and He helps us with that. He doesn’t leave it for us to figure out.

SERMON THOUGHTS

I. Beth Richardson and *Christ Beside Me, Christ Within Me*

- The list for this segment:
“God Is In: Celebrating Presence”
- ✓ This Day
 - ✓ *Christ Before Us*
 - ✓ Seasons
 - ✓ You, O God
 - ✓ God with Us



Christ Before Us

Christ before us.

Christ behind us.

Christ beside us.

Christ within us.

O Christ, be in this place.

From *Christ Beside Me, Christ Within Me: Celtic Blessings* by Beth A. Richardson. Copyright © 2016 by the author. Used with permission of Upper Room Books.

“God is in _____”

How would you finish that phrase? How do you celebrate the sacred presence of God in your life?

God is in...

the joyful times

the sad times

my ...

my ...

my ...

the challenging times

the courageous times

the scary times

Dream #2 from Church Member:

In my youth, before age 20 but I'm not sure when, I dreamed that I entered an open-air temple, floating down through the open ceiling. It was nighttime and there were panels of curtains blowing and I could see the stars overhead. I knew it was a holy place.

There was a light and a presence behind me, and I did not turn around because I knew I should not. I felt like I was standing in the presence of God.

He spoke, and I immediately fell forward with my head to the floor, maybe a hands-and-knees posture, and my jaw clamped shut. I couldn't speak. (I really thought a lot about Zachariah after this!)

I felt overwhelming love and a very gentle but firm voice said to me, “I will be with you on the Northern slopes.” In trying to recollect it, it may have alternately been, “I will be with you on the slopes of the North.” In either case, I can remember it as clearly as if it happened yesterday.

There were a couple of times in my life when I certainly could have been killed traveling on one of the (mountain) passes: Once in high school (although I don't recall if the dream happened before or after that) when a chartered Greyhound bus full of us students lost its purchase when a gear was missed on a slick and snowy road and started to slide backward on Red Mountain Pass, yet miraculously recovered and continued (on its way).

And, again, in my 30's when I got caught in a white-out blizzard driving over Monarch Pass and was terrified because I could no longer see the side of the road.

In either case, or maybe I should say “in any case”, in case it [hasn't] “officially”...happened yet, I have always held that dream as a promise.

When things are really difficult, I pray using the metaphor, “Lord, be with me on these Northern slopes.”

God is in...every aspect of our lives.

II. The Heart of Celtic Spirituality: Spiritual Practices

[Source: U.S. Catholic. <https://www.uscatholic.org/articles/201905/12-celtic-spiritual-practices-celebrate-god-our-world-31727>]

Refresher from last week (“cumulative force” of the series):

- Thresholds and “Thin Places”

For this week:

Soul friendship

...[A] key practice for the Celtic saints was having a soul friend, inspired by earlier desert traditions.

Everyone, whether lay or clergy, man or woman, was expected to have a spiritual mentor and companion on the soul’s journey. This was a person in whom they could confide all of their inner struggles, someone who would help them find their path and who could midwife them in discernment. There was a sense of genuine warmth and intimacy in this relationship and deep respect for the other’s wisdom as a source of blessing. Age or gender differences did not matter.

St. Brigid is often quoted as saying, “Go forth and eat nothing until you get a soul friend, for anyone without a soul friend is like a body without a head; is like the water of a polluted lake, neither good for drinking nor for washing.”

Scripture meditation

*Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.*

—Ruth 1:16

In daily life

I invite you to spend some time seeking out a soul friend. You may already have one in your life: a spiritual director, a wise guide, someone you can turn to when things feel challenging and to whom you entrust the secret desires of your heart.

Encircling

Christ with me, Christ before me

Christ behind me, Christ in me

Christ beneath me, Christ above me

Christ on my right, Christ on my left

Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down

Christ when I arise, Christ to shield me

—Prayer excerpt attributed to St. Patrick

In the Celtic monastic tradition, a *lorica* is a type of prayer seeking protection, invoking the power of God to safeguard against darker forces. You are probably familiar with the *lorica* prayer above, attributed to St. Patrick. The biblical inspiration may come from Ephesians 6:14, which refers to putting on the breastplate of righteousness.

This practice is rooted in the precarious sense people often have of our own existence. Travelers especially faced dangers at night from thieves or wild animals with only fire and prayer as protection.

Scripture meditation

*You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust.”*

—Psalm 91:1–2

In daily life

These breastplate prayers name the presence of Christ in all directions as (1) a shield against harm and (2) a reminder of God's loving presence. You can extend this circle beyond yourself to include your family, your community, your country, and the earth.

CONCLUSION

(*Set the song for reflection up with a return to the themes of the Scripture texts for today.*) It explores the deep faith of the Psalmist *and* the one who receives Jesus' promise of nearness and accessibility as Good News in one of the most beautiful, simple songs I've ever heard.

It also serves as the perfect culmination to this worship series if you allow the central element in it – song, or music, itself – to represent “blessing” which we've been bathing in for the past 7 weeks.

When I realize that God is in every aspect of Creation without qualification, exception, or explanation, then I *can* celebrate the sacred Presence at all times and find myself saying, “Bless to me...” in every circumstance.

Indeed, “Since Love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?”

*Since Love is Lord of
heaven and earth...*



...how can I keep from singing?

♪ “How Can I Keep from Singin’?”