

**Bethany Lutheran, Donalda, AB April 24, 2005, Cam Harder, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon**

**Texts: 1 Pet 2:2-10; Jn 14:1-14**

I'm delighted that you've invited me to preach this morning. There are lots of connections between folks here and the families I served at Messiah in Camrose for many years. And I think Gordon Jensen, my friend at the seminary, has some relatives around as well. I see in your cemetery the familiar names of so many saints that established the Lutheran church on the prairies. It's in places like this that the stories of our heritage are best remembered.

I have to admit that I don't exactly know what you folks are facing here at Bethany. But I've been spending a lot of time with rural communities. I suspect that like most of them, you've been hit with some difficult times the last few years. BSE, drought, frost, grasshoppers and horrible market conditions—it's been really tough to farm or run a rural business. Most rural communities are losing schools, hospitals, stores and churches. The larger centres suck up most of the resources in the region. It's hard to imagine a future. The kids are leaving and most aren't coming back. Congregations are declining and getting older. They worry about how long they can pay a pastor, keep their doors open. They're grieving the loss of a great heritage.

And families are under so much stress. Most farm families now have at least one or both spouses working off-farm. So there's not much time for kids, for curling and 4H, for romance. There's a lot of fear. Every person I've met who's in financial difficulty wrestles with depression. Some struggle with alcohol, family violence. Many have told me they feel ashamed that people look at them differently because they are struggling. Some feel that they aren't good people anymore—that God has turned his back.

A lot of rural communities live under a pall of corporate depression. They're weary of fighting overwhelming forces that are slowly sucking their life away. They often feel tired, or angry, or worthless.

If any of this has been your experience, or the experience of people you know, listen carefully to the words of our text this morning. Peter tells us, "You are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a chosen race, God's own people." Some might say "No? Really? Can those words be addressed to us? Can a church that's small, can people who are struggling be called a royal priesthood, a chosen race? How can that be possible?"

It's possible because that's exactly the sort of people God chooses. God puts down roots in small places like Donalda and Bethlehem. *This* is the sort of place God likes to call home. *You* are the sort of people God loves to call family. In our Gospel lesson Jesus says that he is the Way to the Father. Jesus takes us to the Father. And that way goes deep into places of struggle and suffering.

Look at Jesus. Where does the Second Person of the Trinity choose to enter human life? In the womb of an unwed peasant girl who's almost put away for shame. The Son of God conceived out of wedlock! Where was he born? Homeless, in the streets of a backwoods village. (There's no mention of a stable in the Bible, you know, just a feeding trough in Bethlehem.) Where did he live? For the first years he was on the run, a refugee in Egypt fleeing from Herod's slaughter of Bethlehem babies. What was his work? For a while it was the plain, honest work of a carpenter. But he left even that when he was thirty to wander the Galilean hillsides living on welfare provided by women. And look at his friends. Fishermen, lepers, traitorous tax collectors, sex trade workers. Folks no upstanding Israelite would dare to be seen with.

In our lesson last week he called himself a Good Shepherd. I'll bet the religious folks

laughed when they heard that. Shepherds were mostly despised. They were dirty. They didn't go to temple or synagogue because they had to look after the animals. One rabbi lumps them in with thieves and murderers. Good Shepherd! It was a contradiction in terms like jumbo shrimp. And look at how Jesus dies. Barely 33 years old. Condemned by religious leaders as a blasphemer who claimed to be God; condemned by the Romans as a traitor who claimed to be the king of the Jews; condemned as a terrorist who talked about tearing down the temple and rebuilding it. He died utterly humiliated, hung up before all the world as a lesson to those who dared oppose the righteous Sanhedrin and the power of Rome.

Is that the sort of life you'd want for your kids? Is that what you say when you look in on them at night I hope they grow up like Jesus? Not me. It's the sort of life we all try to avoid. Yet Jesus *sought* the places of failure and suffering. He sought the company of folks we don't really think good people should associate with. That's where Jesus takes us to find God. That's his Way. Jesus knows that the Father makes his home in the places where there is grief and loss, struggle, shame or despair. How do we know that the Father is there? Because it was in that dark pit that the Father met the Son and raised him from the dead.

So listen. When you're low, when your future seems dark, when you feel ashamed, God hasn't *withdrawn* from you. God has drawn *close* to you. Jesus' way runs right through the heart of your darkest nights, your deepest secrets. It's your hurting, hoping, helpless heart that he chooses to call home.

1 Cor 1 and 2 Paul says God has chosen what is weak, foolish, low and despised in the world, to shame the strong, the wise, the noble. Why? Why would God choose struggling folks? Why would Jesus take such a strange, dark way? Surely the Way of Jesus should be the way of financial success, the way of clean living, the way of righteous company, the way of model citizenship. That's what most of us church people strive for.

Yet God chooses the weak. Why? Well Paul says, in 1 Cor, so that no one can boast in themselves, but only in the Lord. He says in 2 Cor 4 that we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. 8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. Do you see? God is our *only* hope. And when is it that we really discover that? When things are going well? When everyone respects us, when we are on top of the world? No. When we are at the end of our rope, when we know that we need God. Then we discover that he truly is our only hope, our all in all. And then the world sees and knows that it is *God's* power, not our own goodness or strength, that sustains us.

That's where I've found him in my life when our babies died in the womb, when friends betrayed me, when loved ones died, when I've faced overwhelming challenges, when I've despaired about myself. That's where I meet the suffering Christ, who is not ashamed to share my humiliation, who insists on calling me *beloved*, a royal priest, a chosen son. It's hard to believe him of course. But Jesus walked the walk. He walked the way of suffering and shame. And that's where he expects to take us out into the community, vulnerable to others, open to their hurts, willing to share our own hurts, touching lives with grace instead of judgement, with understanding eyes instead of embarrassed avoidance.

I was on a plane and got talking to the woman in the seat beside me. She found out that I had done some work with bankrupt farmers and she began to tell me her story in a whisper so no one else could hear. Her family has farmed for generations in Saskatchewan. But the last couple of

decades have been a struggle. Her dad's partner tried to commit suicide. So did her mom. Her dad succeeded. Now the farm's been left to this woman, but she can't make a go of it either. The strain is breaking her marriage.

I said to her, "So where is God in all this?" She looked at me and said, "Why is God doing this to us? What did we do to deserve this?" And I said, "You know, farms are in trouble all over. There are a lot of reasons for financial problems. But I know for sure, this is not God's punishment. God loves you, treasures you and nothing you can do on the farm, whether you succeed or lose it, nothing's going to change how God feels about you. You are God's precious child and you have never been so dear to him as you are right now."

She started to cry. Turns out she went to church. But she thought God had abandoned her. She'd forgotten that Jesus' way leads right into the heart of her deep hurt and anxiety.

Let me say one more thing. Jesus' way goes through Donald, through Bethany, not just because it's a place where there might be some struggles. Also because it's *small* and God can do a lot of things better with small stuff. God likes to work with mustard seed, and yeast. I've served some large churches. They have their limitations. There are many things they can't do as well as you.

Small congregations are better at caring for people. They notice when Henry's not in church. The grapevine works good everybody knows when Gladys is going in for surgery and she gets lots of prayers and support. It's actually quite hard to leave a small church. It's not easy to get out the back door without someone noticing. At Messiah people could leave without anyone noticing.

Small churches can be better at valuing people's gifts. In a large congregation you always think, "Well, someone else can do this better." In a small church you know that there may not be anyone else who can do it at all so you've got to step up to the plate.

Smaller churches are better at remembering their history, cherishing it, and learning from it. They remember the saints that built that congregation and they pass on the stories.

Smaller churches do a better job of connecting the generations. In large churches, like Messiah where I worked, each age had its own group and they didn't mix much. In small churches it makes sense to do things as whole families. So you learn from the perspectives of the other generations.

Smaller churches, especially the rural ones, are better at celebrating the rhythms of life and special occasions. People know when someone has a 50<sup>th</sup> birthday or a silver wedding anniversary and they get celebrated. Harvest festivals, work bees, Mother's day services help bring the life of the community before the throne of God.

Small churches are better at building leaders. Proportionately you produce four times as many pastors and lay leaders than large congregations do. Because in a small church people with energy and vision can flourish and get things done. You don't have to go through sixteen layers of red tape like they do in large churches. And small churches often have longer periods without pastors. You learn how to do ministry yourselves. You develop mature Christians.

You may not see it. You may not always feel it. But *here in this place* Jesus is truly present, God is truly at home. *You* are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, God's own people.