**Lent 1 – Who is Jesus: Presence (March 6th)**

In the last few weeks we have been thinking about how we relate to Jesus.

Jesus as Friend, Jesus as Teacher, Jesus as Saviour, and Jesus as The Way. Perhaps some of these descriptions have resonated with you more than others – and if you didn’t hear all the messages, then you can read the sermons on our website, or watch the service again.

But today, we come to Jesus as Presence – which I think is very fitting as we begin our Lenten journey together.

You see, when we think of Jesus as Presence – that is present with us now – we are no longer thinking about Jesus as an historical figure who lived, and breathed, and taught, and was friend to all – instead we are thinking about Jesus living WITH us, now.

And I think that is part of the invitation of Lent.

It is time when we drawer deeper and closer to God, and a time when we can reflect on how do we live WITH God’s presence?

The first thing we need to know is that Living WITH Jesus as Presence, means being open to the Spirit.

Jesus knew that his time on earth would be limited, and so he told his followers again and again that when he left, they would not be left alone – God would send them a helper, an advocate, a comforter, a guide that would be with them forever.

Jesus is referring of course to the Spirit. He says:

*“the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”* (John 14:26)

It is through the Spirit, that Jesus would be with his disciples.

And it is through the Spirit that Jesus is constantly present with us today.

It is also through the Spirit that Jesus felt God’s presence.

In our reading today, it begins by reminding us that Jesus was full of the Spirit, and was led by the Spirit. As Jesus went into the wilderness, he knew that God was with him.

So, what is the Spirit?

In the Hebrew scriptures, the Spirit is called *ruach, pneuma,* and *shekhinah*, meaning ‘wind’, ‘breath’ and ‘dwelling’.

I am reminded of the best-selling book called ‘The Shack’ by William Young, that was made into a popular movie. Perhaps you have seen it. In the movie, the character that plays the Spirit is called *Sarayu*, which in Hindi means Wind or Holy River. She is dressed in flowing garments and seems to float as she walks around.

I wonder - is that how you imagine the presence of the Spirit?

In early Judaism, the term *Shekhinah* was used to define the presence of God from the beginning of time. God’s Spirit in Creation. Old Testament scholar, Amy Levine writes:

“*Judasim has the idea of the Shekhinah, the feminine presence of God descending to earth and dwelling among human beings.”*

Do you see the Spirit dwelling in those around you?

Do you see some people literally alive with the Spirit in all they say, think, and do?

One of the focuses of Celtic Christianity, is the embodiment of God’s Spirit in everything around us, especially in creation and nature.

Perhaps that is how you experience Jesus as presence.

Sometimes in the church I think we have been guilty of placing too much emphasis on the transcendent God that is far away and in heaven. Looking down on us, with Jesus seated in robes at the right hand of God.

But if we are to understand Jesus as Presence, then we need to rethink this!

I remember when Gavin was young – and I’m sorry that you’re here today, Gavin, but I was going to tell this story anyways!

He was always an inquisitive child. Always asking questions. And when he was about 3 years old, he asked: “Where is God?”

Well, not having had any theological training at that time, I confess that my immediate reaction was to quote my childhood theology and say, "God is in heaven".

But Gavin wasn't satisfied with that. In fact, that answer just prompted more questions because we had recently laid flowers at his uncle’s and his Nanny's memorial sites, which of course went along with an explanation that they were in heaven, looking down on him.

So, when I told Gavin that God was in Heaven, after a brief thinking time, he asked: “Is God dead too?”

His simple and honest questioning made me think. Where is God?

I tried to answer him again: "No, Gavin, God is not dead. He is all around us. He is in everything. He is alive in your heart."

Perhaps my theology was changing?

But, had I satisfied this inquisitive child? I thought so .... until three days later.

"If God is everywhere, why can't we see God?”

Again, this questioning 3-year-old made me stop and think.

How do we see God? Do I see God?

Well, after a brief moment I replied that we can see God in all the things around us – through all creation – then, with a smile Gavin proceeded to point at the flowers on the table, to our cats, to his uneaten cheerios and after each one said: "God is there, and there, and there …"

I think I learned that day to see God’s presence in places where I hadn't seen God before.

It’s a cute story – but it does remind us that Jesus as Presence is always with us – and is in everything.

Diana Butler Bass writes:

“*God is both immanent and transcendent, here and there, close and far, completely with us and absolutely beyond our imagining.”*

Jesus as presence is with us in all we do, even the mundane tasks like laundry, cooking, cleaning and so forth.

In our small Advent study group last December, one of the things we focussed on was Christ – ‘‘all in all” – and how when we stop to remember Christ in everything we do - then Jesus as Presence takes on a new understanding.

Theologian Grace Ji-Sun Kim puts it well:

*“The Christian faith is not ‘seeing is believing’, but rather, ‘believing is seeing’. We must open our eyes and hearts and see Jesus’ presence in our lives.”*

And what does that mean for us when we truly experience the presence of Jesus in our lives? When we live in the Spirit?

Does it mean that life will be all great?

That you will always be happy?

That there will be no knocks and bumps along the way?

That there will be no fear, frustration, or temptation?

Absolutely not!

Our scripture reminds us of that. When Jesus went into the wilderness, he was filled with the Spirit – filled with God’s presence, but still he had a really tough time. He was tempted beyond belief.

He was offered food to fill his hungry and growling stomach.

He was offered the splendors and riches of the world.

He was offered the chance to prove God’s might.

These would have been tough tests – tempting offers. We sometimes gloss over the fact that this was a time of great difficulty for Jesus.

But Jesus was able to get through this tough time, because he was filled with the Spirit – filled with God’s presence.

When we open ourselves up the Spirit, and to a way of experiencing Jesus as presence, then we too are given strength to overcome difficulties.

My heart breaks right now for the people of Ukraine – and I know people will ask, ‘Where is God in this senseless violence?”

My answer is that God is right there with them – present in the form of the Spirit. Guiding them and giving them strength to face these dark times.

In Paul’s letter to the Romans he reminds them:

*“..the Spirit comes to help our weakness.”* (Romans 8:26)

And Jesus told his disciples *“…The Spirit of Truth will guide you…”* (John 16:13)

Knowing Jesus as Presence, means to open yourself to the Spirit.

And when you do that, you have an incredible sense that God is always with you – just like I say in the benediction each week – God walks before us, Jesus walks beside us, and the Spirit surrounds – this is God’s presence!

As I said at the beginning, in the last few weeks we have been reflecting about how we know Jesus.

If you are struggling with who is Jesus for you – then just remember, that knowing Jesus is part of our ever-changing faith story.

Who are you Jesus? - is a question that has a myriad of answers.

We can not learn the answers in a book.

We can not even learn the answers in church.

Although we celebrate our return to in person worship today, Covid has taught us that Jesus is not confined to a building.

Butler Bass writes:

“*In the last months we have found Jesus with us on our walk; as we listen to music; as we see faces on zoom; as we pray with those that are sick over the phone; as we bake bread…. Jesus is a presence that is always with us.”*

Covid 19 has forced Jesus out of the cathedral and into the world, reminding us that knowing Jesus is not about coming to church, but about being in relationship with the Divine.

We know Jesus through our experiences.

And we answer the question of ‘Who is Jesus’ through telling our stories.

So, as we begin our journey of Lent together, I invite you to reflect on your story of how Jesus is present in your life, and I encourage you to share that story with someone this week.

And as we continue in our Lenten journey – may we use this sacred time to be open the presence of the Spirit, allowing it to call us, and to transform us in our relationship with Christ – friend, teacher, saviour, the way and Presence.

Amen.