

4th Sunday of Easter
Church of the Advent
May 12, 2019
Rev. Ellen Richardson

The Shepherd's Voice

Did you know that by long tradition the fourth Sunday of Easter each year is designated as Good Shepherd Sunday? Offering sweet pastoral images of springtime and lambing season, it usually fits perfectly into the Eastertide season of Resurrection, giving us the opportunity to appreciate the 23rd psalm outside of its familiar role in the grief and goodbyes of funerals. I would bet that many of us have memorized *The Lord is my Shepherd* in our lifetimes; I know it was the first thing that my 4 year old came home reciting from his Baptist preschool and I bet it is still resting somewhere in his brain. The other readings for this particular Sunday rotate in a three year cycle, usually offering images of Jesus as both shepherd and lamb--and of ourselves as sheep.

However, this particular year it is a bit of a stretch to look through our hodge-podge of readings for any green pastures to lie down in. From the Book of Acts featuring a miracle attributed to Peter in the very early Church, to the Book of Revelation proclaiming Jesus as the Lamb on the Throne of God, to the Gospel of John set at the Temple showing Jesus in a contentious conversation being challenged to identify himself as the Messiah, today's readings are so busy and disjointed that rather than leading us to still waters to restore our souls, they seem to throw us right into a deep river with a strong current. It is another reminder that though what we *crave* when looking to the Word of God are understanding, reassurance and comfort, sometimes what we *get* is challenge and puzzlement. But we are Easter people, mostly willing to keep moving towards the mystery of an empty tomb, so we have what it takes to press on, to handle a bit of mystery today, to seek some new learning, some new hope to be planted within us to be harvested at just the right time when we most need its nourishment.

Our first reading tells the story of the raising of the woman Tabitha in the town of Joppa. Peter was doing what all the disciples did after Jesus had ascended into heaven--traveling and visiting faithful followers of The Way. Joppa was the 1st Century name of a seaside port town

on the Mediterranean. Tabitha was a member of a community of widows, which included women whose husbands had died, who had been abandoned by divorce, and who had never married and were no longer under their father's protection. Even though women of the 1st Century were considered more as property of men than full citizens, Jewish Law and custom dictated that widows should be respected and cared for, and it makes sense that Peter's visit to Joppa would include a visit to the widows. Who knows if he had any inkling of what he was about to do for them when he got there.

Tabitha, called Dorcas in the Greek translation, means gazelle, which per biblical scholars would probably be more a nickname than a proper name, leading them to speculate that she could have been a former slave. Peter found Tabitha's community of women, who shared a commitment to good works and acts of charity, grieving her very recent death; they were weeping for the loss of her and showing off clothing she had made. Peter stepped in to their circle and prayed before he told Tabitha to get up. Not much drama, really, until she opened her eyes and was proved to be alive. I imagine there was plenty of drama afterwards, as there is nothing that gets humans worked up like an unexpected miracle, regardless of how it was rendered. The cup was running over in Joppa that day for sure. The author of Acts, the Gospel Evangelist Luke recorded this story as one meant to further God's kingdom in the world through the work of the first disciples of the risen Jesus Christ.

Our second reading today from the book of Revelation is not so much a story retold as a descriptive fantasy. It sounds like a graphic novel, with images drawn from the imagination of what heaven might look like and sound like. The writer describes a final gathering of the 12 Tribes of Israel, 12,000 people from each (144,000 in total) at the end of times. Clothed in robes of white, singing praises to the Lamb who is King, those who had suffered a great ordeal are being guided by their shepherd to the springs of the water of life, where there would be no more hunger or thirst, no more scorching by the sun, no more weeping in pain or distress. It is these images of a forever-land with God--a place of perfect love and peace--that we cling to when reaching for the other side of our mortality. In this scene the shepherd is not a mere child in sandals with a rod and a staff to comfort his sheep and a brave heart to keep away the wolves, but rather a triumphant King worshiped and adored for all eternity.

This image of dwelling in the house of the Lord forever is both beautiful and a little intimidating, almost scary, because it is surreal and outside any human experience. It conjures up light and sound and thousands of people singing and saying Amen! with exclamation points in a scene that would send sheep running and scattering in every possible direction with bleating that would translate to something like "Yikes!"

Then then we come to our gospel, where Jesus explains to those in the Temple who are having a hard time accepting who he says he is. He is trying to explain that his message cannot be understood as a spectator sport, that it is not just *hearing* the Good News, not just *believing* in the *idea* of Jesus that brings us into the sheepfold of God, but a *relationship* between Jesus and his sheep that gives them the eyes to see, the ears to hear, and the heart to understand his message of unconditional love and forgiveness.

I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.

Jesus was saying in this kind of testy exchange that it is God's *relationship* with each and every one of God's creatures that is the source of our ultimate salvation. We can listen to images of dazzle and glory in the heavens and wonder if that is something we will get to see first-hand someday. We can hear stories of rare and unexplained blessing we like to call miracles, like whatever happened between Peter and Tabitha, attributing them to the intensity and faithfulness of our own prayers. What Jesus is saying here is that being our Shepherd is *more* than that. He wants *relationship* with each and every one of us. He wants to be close enough and entrenched enough in our lives that we recognize his voice not just during those gratitude-filled miraculous times, but even in the storms, even in the dark, even at the hour of our death. God does not dictate our every move, or manipulate our every decision; but God longs to be with us--beside us, above us, below us, within us--in such faithful relationship that we are fully known, for our whole lives and throughout eternity. In such a relationship, we can never be snatched out of the hand of the Shepherd who is ready to restore our souls, to guide us along right pathways, to spread a table before us and anoint our heads with oil. Our Good Shepherd is not just the guy who keeps us from wandering off or getting ourselves in trouble dancing with the wolves; but

rather one who longs for a full and constant *relationship* with us--a relationship that demands our attention, our nurturing of it, our wrestling with it, and our unembarrassed, unapologetic claim of it on our lives to those who have not yet heard his voice and desperately need his love.

We know this because we have heard the Shepherd's voice. Maybe not all the time, and maybe not always at the same volume or clarity, but we know it when we hear it, and we know that when we stop to listen to it, when it invites us into relationship, we will find our cup running over with comfort and goodness and mercy always. Amen.