

Sermon: Easter 4

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May 7, 2017

Year A
Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10

There's a little bit of potentially bad news... in today's lectionary... if we understand some of what's written in the wrong way... so I'll try to practice some moral courage... and deal with the bad news first... because our reading from 1 Peter reminds me of the passage in Matthew 5:46 which says... *For if you love those who love you... what reward do you have... do not even the tax collectors do the same...* 1 Peter seems to tell us to do more... if you endure suffering when you have done wrong... meh... but if you endure suffering when you have done right [smile]... then you have God's approval... it says that God approves of us... when we suffer for doing right... but I don't believe for a moment... not even for a nanosecond... that God *wants us* to suffer... or that God enjoys our suffering...

But we will... sometimes... suffer... when we do right... not because doing right is wrong... but because it can threaten others so much... that they will threaten to harm us... or will actually harm us... that doing right... so disrupts and threatens evil and evil systems... that some will try to get us to stop doing good... sometimes by any means... like that 90-year-old Florida man... and two church officials... who were arrested a couple years ago... for feeding the homeless in public... sometimes the suffering will be overt... like being jailed... or beaten... or even killed... and sometimes it will be so passive / aggressive... so subtle... that we may feel sick to our stomachs... but not be sure just why...

But violence only begets more violence... and so we exhibit spiritual maturity when we don't return violence with the same... and so we read 1 Peter cautiously... we reject everything that says we deserve to suffer... we reject hate-speech... we reject everything that dis-respects the dignity of every human being...

You may remember what comes just before... today's Gospel story about the sheep and the sheepfold... we read it on March 26... it's John 9:1-41... the story about Jesus healing the man born blind... but more than just that... it's about seeing... and who can see... it's about what blinds us so we can't see what God wants us to see... or do what God wants us to do... and about what we don't want to see... and today's Gospel is about thieves and bandits... about sheep and a shepherd... and about hearing...

When my former wife was pregnant with our daughter... we heard through *La Leche League*... about the importance of communicating with her *in utero*... about the importance of speaking to her... telling her stories... playing music for her... telling her that she was already our beloved... to let her know that she'd be welcomed into a life outside of her current world... Jean spoke to Rachel... but it was easier for me to get closer... to create a kind of intimacy that two faces... close to each other... can bring... in a small way... I had called my own... and when Rachel was born... the very first time she heard me speak... she immediately turned her head in the direction of my voice... she knew it's sound... she knew who I was...

Today's Gospel makes us yearn to hear God's voice in this way too... we want God to speak directly to us... for God's face to be close to ours... for our eardrums to vibrate with the melody of God's love song... we want God to speak to us from a burning bush... we want God to speak to us from the clouds—even though some will say it was just thunder... we want to be the beloved sheep—the one God will come looking for when we get lost... and the truth is... we are... we know this deep in our souls... we already know which way to turn our hearts... when we hear God's voice...

But most of us don't want to be sheep... sheep are dim-witted... they're compliant followers... of each other and of social convention... the images of sheep we have... contradict our sense of ourselves as independent... the images of sheep we have contradict our sense of our own self-determination...

But we are like sheep... by nature they're wanderers... they're inquisitive... curious... that's why they need shepherds to go find them when they get lost... and one of the ways we get lost... is when we pay more attention to the voices of the world... than to the still small voice of God within us... when we believe judgment more than we believe redemption.... when we believe the voices of the world which yell curses... which say that our Easter hope is misguided... that we're following blindly... that death will have the final word... more than we believe that we are God's beloved in whom God is well pleased...

And although we generally dislike the idea of having a shepherd... or Big Brother... or anyone... looking over our shoulder... no matter how grown up we think we are... we need God's guidance... no matter how much we like our independence... we can't do it alone... that's why we have community... and that's why Jesus is *our* shepherd...

Today's Gospel may seem out of place for Eastertide... but our gate... is our baptism... our gate is passing through death with Christ... and rising to new life... not living for ourselves... but living for others... actually... shepherds used to sleep across the sheepfold's opening... there was no gate *per se*... so they were the gate... it was around them... that thieves and bandits would have to climb... Jesus is the gate... and the gate is his way of being... his style of functioning... we enter into the sheepfold... by being how he was... and is... this is how abundant life becomes ours...

Jesus uses pastoral imagery here... based in Ezekiel 34... where the Kings of Israel were the bad shepherds who endangered and exploited the flock... and where God is The Good Shepherd who rescues the sheep and places them in the care of God's servant David... that is... under the care of a restored monarchy... and the restored monarchy finds its fullest expression in Jesus...

But sometimes The Good Shepherd says things we don't want to hear... because it's easier to play a victim... it's easier not to have to change... but Jesus is The Good

Shepherd... who brings radical forgiveness... unconditional love... unmerited grace... community made up of all tribes and languages and peoples and nations... spiritual nourishment... and new life... but the parable he uses today... the updated figure of speech he uses today... says that the Pharisees are the thieves and the bandits... they may claim to give these things... but they come only to steal... and destroy... and kill... and sometimes... Pharisees say things... that make it easier for us not to take responsibility... for us to avoid moral courage...

But the Pharisees didn't quite get it... they thought of themselves as the shepherds... and not as thieves or bandits... even though they had just shown their hand in the previous chapter... when they cared more about the Law than about healing... and drove out the man whose sight was restored by Jesus... so it doesn't matter what label we put on people... then or now... what matters is whether they have the flock's best interest at heart... Jesus did... it was his healing of the blind man that showed him to be The Good Shepherd... who comes to the flock... and to whom the sheep respond...

Have you noticed those people who want to be first... I see them speeding along M-6 and 131... exceeding the speed limit and passing everyone they can... creating some dangerous situations... they don't seem to have the common good in mind... and some want to be first in other ways... off the highway too... but when we are baptized... we die to our old selves... and are reborn with Christ... we stop living for ourselves... and start living for others... unfortunately... supporting the common good... has become far too uncommon...

Jesus gives the gift of abundant life... it's why we are here today... it's what draws us in... when so many are at home on Sunday morning... not being formed... not experiencing community... we are here because we experience God's forgiveness... and grace... and unconditional love... we are here because we have the chance to work at... to practice the moral courage to which we are called... in spite of our imperfection...

Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber said... *So I think in a way that might sound sort of cynical... don't trust us... don't be idealistic about this community or about me... to me that just opens a door for grace... because what I say to people... is like... I'm glad you love it here... but at some point... I will disappoint you... or the church will let you down... please decide beforehand... that after it happens... you will still stick around... because if you leave... you will miss the way that God's grace comes in and fills in the cracks of our brokenness... and it's too beautiful to miss... don't miss it...*

But there are some people who are missing it... some people who have left us... because they weren't fed the way they wanted to be... or didn't hear the music they wanted to hear... or maybe there was something I did or didn't do... maybe they were close to the gate... but didn't know quite how to get in... but I can tell you... we get in by dying to who we are or who we think we are..... and by our willingness to let go of what we know or think we know... of the relationships we have and what we think they mean... we have to risk leaving everything behind... because The Good Shepherd loves us more than we can know... and satisfies our desires and hungers more than we can imagine... and the more we relax our grip on what the world offers... the more our hands are open to receive what Jesus offers...

The Rev. G. Cole Gruberth wrote: *In the end... our only wisdom is to know our shepherd's voice... our one skill as sheep is to listen... to listen from the deep place within ourselves... in which we recognize that Jesus doesn't call us to become something different... but calls us to grow into who we truly are...*

So we need to listen... we need to listen for anything that sounds too Pharisaical... and we need to listen for The Good Shepherd... we need to trust our gut... to know that we're invited through the gate that Jesus opens... into relationship and communion... and to know... that the voice we hear in this womb... is God's voice... so that when we hear it... when we realize who is speaking to us... we immediately turn our heads in its direction... Holy God... make it so...