

Sermon for Easter 4A
Sunday, April 30, 2023
“The Lord is Our Shepherd”

Texts: John 10:1-10; Psalm 23

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the season of Easter, we proclaim “the Lord is risen indeed,” and we focus on the ways in which we can declare that “we have seen the Lord.” The past three Sundays were about the *what* of Easter. Today, we begin to explore the *why* of Easter. Why is the Easter proclamation important? Why does it matter for us and for the world that Jesus Christ is risen indeed and we have seen him?

In our lectionary cycle, the 4th Sunday of Easter is designated as “Good Shepherd” Sunday and begs the question: “Why do we need a shepherd?” Psalm 23 reminds us that because God is our shepherd, we will not be in want, we will lack nothing, we will be blessed with everything we need. It may be difficult for many of us city folk or if you didn’t grow up on a farm to fully understand the rich imagery here, but for the people who followed Jesus and the communities for whom St. John wrote his gospel, shepherds and sheep herding were a common part of their experience, so the use of sheep was an effective image to use in describing our relationship with God.

The passage from St. John’s Gospel that serves as today’s gospel lesson comes immediately after Jesus healed a man who had been born blind. Jesus was trying to convince his disciples and the Pharisees who confronted him that it wasn’t the result of man’s sin or even the sin of his parents that caused his blindness, but through his disability, God’s fullness and power could be revealed. Unfortunately, the Pharisees couldn’t see it; their spiritual blindness left them unconvinced, so they kicked the healed man out of the synagogue. Jesus reacted to that confrontation by enlightening those around him about our relationship to God and his relationship to us. He used the familiar images of sheep and shepherds to offer a framework for living that was focused on the limitless experience of God and not on the limitations of the physical and mortal world. By entering the sheepfold of which Jesus is the gate, we can both be in the presence of God and experience his fullness. We will know him by his voice, just like sheep know the voice of the shepherd, and the safety of the sheepfold is a liberation from the burdens of the world.

In the gospel lesson, Jesus said, “I am the gate.” A gate protects, a gate selects, and a gate invites. A gate protects those inside from the harmful things outside it. It helps keep the sheep safe. Jesus, the incarnation of God on earth, is the gate who protects his sheep those things which harm us in our lives. From within the gate, we can enjoy life to its fullest and rejoice, because we know that as long as we know that God is our gate, we will be safe.

A gate selects. Because of the gate, the sheep will not leave the fold. The gate helps identify the sheep and the shepherd to whom they belong. Now this function of the gate can be tricky. All too often the Christian Church has used this metaphor as a

reason to exclude those who do not believe, profess, or conform to Christianity, often insisting that it be followed in a particular way. “Either you’re in or you’re out.” But I think the gate serves a more important purpose: it helps identify those of us who are members of the Body of Christ to the outside world. That helps us proclaim to the world our relationship with the shepherd—our relationship with God whose fullness we understand by his revelation through Jesus Christ. The world can see that we are part of the sheepfold by how we live out our lives. We show that we are members of this fold by taking part in its life, by being active members of a community of believers through our baptism. In fact, the first words of today’s first lesson from the Acts of the Apostles are repeated in the first vow we make in our Baptismal Covenant where we promise “to continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.” We pray for each other and for the world, we break bread together by sharing in the Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and we spread the good news of Jesus Christ to the world in continuity with countless believers over the last two thousand years. We commit to helping and supporting each other in the community and we let that show in the way we relate to the world around us. How we express our membership in the fold shows the world that we have entered the gate and are part of something meaningful. We need not fear being part of this, because Jesus, the gate, protects us.

Finally the gate invites, not excludes, but invites. It invites others to come into the protective bounds of faith in Jesus Christ. It invites others to share in our love and commitment to God by proclaiming that Jesus Christ is the risen Lord. Although the gate selects out the sheep in the fold, it is always open to those who wish to come into the fold. The gate is always open to those who wish to know the love of God through the teachings of Jesus the Anointed One. The gate is always open to those who want to take part in a community of love, respect, support, and renewal. The gate invites all of us to enjoy the love and protection of the shepherd whose voice we hear and whose voice we know.

Now back to the question I asked at the beginning of my sermon: Why do we need a shepherd? The words of the psalm appointed for today, Psalm 23, speak to that. That psalm is very powerful, especially during these times when we aren’t sure what’s going to happen next. These times when our future seems uncertain. These times when we feel helpless and hopeless, turmoil and desperation; when we feel like we don’t know how we will go on. Those times when we aren’t sure whether God is really there or not, in the midst of our fears, doubts, and questions. But, because he is our shepherd, God will never abandon us.

We need a shepherd in our lives and we need to act like sheep, because life can be quite hectic, frantic, and always changing. We are constantly on-the-go and it seems like we have very little time to rest. And even when we are trying to rest, something or someone seems to interrupt our down time. It is worth noting that the “paths” mentioned in the psalm are the translation of a word that doesn’t mean flat, paved paths,

or even nicely groomed dirt paths, but rather, the trenches made by the wheels of an ox-cart. In other words, the psalm tells us that God leads us through the entrenchments of life to a more settled place—to pastures that are luscious and green, beside waters that are still and calm. With God as our shepherd, we are reassured of comfort in the time of trouble, we are invited to slow down and be refreshed, and we are reminded that he is our shield and armor against all adversity: all the haters we encounter from day to day, all the people wish to do us harm or who do harm in the world. And God protects us during the things that can disrupt our lives, like disaster and tragedy.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me: thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.” In the midst of anything that happens in our lives, God will lift us up, seat us at a table full of his abundance, and elevate us to the status of a king. (Since ancient times, priests, prophets, and kings have been anointed with oil at their ordinations, consecrations, and coronations. That very act will take place at the end of the week as the United Kingdom crowns its new king.)

Another interesting thing worth noting in the psalm occurs in the last verse when it says: “Surely, his goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.” God’s mercy doesn’t simply follow us like a shadow, being dragged wherever we go; rather, it *pursues* us—it comes after us. God doesn’t simply follow us hoping to offer us his goodness and mercy; he actively pursues us, so that he showers us constantly in his loving-kindness.

We need to be sheep who trust our good shepherd to lead us in every aspect of our lives, through the good and the bad, along the paved paths or through the rough entrenchments of our lives. Jesus tells us, in the words of the Gospel, that he is the gate, the way in to a place where we can find rest and refreshment, solitude and solace, peace and protection from the world that is constantly going, moving, shifting, changing, and bearing down on us. It is the risen Christ that reassures us that the sheepfold into which we are invited isn’t going anywhere, because it is here for us always. It is a place where we can go when we need to slow down, take a breather, and just exit the real world for a while.

Who is our shepherd? God is. Why do we need shepherding? To comfort us throughout the ups and downs of life, even when we aren’t sure of our way forward, and to reassure us that our shepherd will never abandon us. As sheep in the fold of Jesus Christ, we declare that we have seen the risen Lord who came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. Amen.

Resources

Feasting on the Word for the Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year A, Volume 2)

The Working Preacher, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1993

<http://biblehub.com/hebrew/4570.htm>