

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Easter 4-A (3 May 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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Collect

O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

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

1 Good Shepherd Sunday

My father-in-law, John Barnhill, is a rancher. When I met him, among the other animals cultivated on his ranch, he also had sheep. So not only a rancher, but a shepherd. When John Barnhill the shepherd would go out to visit his flock of sheep, he liked to recite for any newborn sheep a poem by William Blake:

Little Lamb who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?
Gave thee life & bid thee feed.
By the stream & o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing wooly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice!
Little Lamb who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?

And on it goes.

When Becky and I were still newly married, we wrote a variation on that poem, word for word and rhyme for rhyme, that began,

Little Lamb, who ate thee?
Dost thou know who ate thee?

I'll let you decide whose idea this was.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday: three of our four readings mention sheep. The one that doesn't is from Acts, talking about the new church gathered together in Jerusalem a couple months after Jesus' resurrection. But that will prove relevant for us today as well!

2 The gate keeper

One notable feature of John's Gospel is that Jesus describes himself with seven different "I am" statements. Ironically, it's the next verse after today's Gospel reading where Jesus says "I am the good shepherd." We'll read that on Easter 4, Good Shepherd Sunday, *next* year. This year, instead, Jesus says, "I am the door." Jesus is the door through which the sheep pass in and out of their pen. By extension, Jesus is the *door-keeper* and the sheep know his voice.

There are a lot of would-be shepherds clamoring for our attention and filling up our email these days. Marketers, politicians, and other commercial concerns are making offers that claim to be from the goodness of their hearts, though often it doesn't take much searching to find their profit motive. Business interests are lobbying for public money, but have laid off over 30 million of the people who worked hard to *provide* that public money. Lots of people who still *have* their jobs are being told to come to work or lose their jobs – even in the midst of uncertainty about whether they can do so safely. Many shepherds call for our attention, and we are justified in hearing them with skeptical ears.

But when my father-in-law goes out on the ranch and calls out to his animals, they come to him. Sometimes I go with him and I'll call out to the animals. It doesn't have the same effect. But when he calls out, they come running. They know his voice. Not only do they know his voice, they know he usually has with him some corn for the goats or cubes for the cows or leftovers for the dogs. They know his voice and they know, from daily experience, that he shows them the way to good things.

3 The gifts of the gate keeper

So Jesus as the gate and the gatekeeper calls out to his sheep, that is, to anyone who will pay attention to him, and calls them to good things. That's what we see happening in Acts. Jesus, speaking through the tiny community of his disciples, called to the pilgrims from various nations visiting Jerusalem for the Jewish Feast of Weeks, which Christians today celebrate as Pentecost. Thousands of people hear Jesus' voice and respond: they eagerly receive the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers. Many of them stay long past their intended itinerary, engaging with this new community, which is why they so famously sold their possessions and shared everything in common so that they could have more time together.

4 The invitation to today

Today we are strangers in a strange land, pandemic pilgrims trying to find our way through uncharted territory, lacking many of our usual resources and comforts. While many people compete for our attention, our allegiance,

our devotion, or at least our fear, Jesus continues to invite us to those things that will feed our souls and lead us to freedom.

This is a time for us to devote ourselves to the apostles' teachings: to a re-engagement with our Bibles, with the various formation offerings at St. Thomas', from our Diocese, and elsewhere. Have you heard the book we are podcasting from the website, *Sheer Christianity*? There are countless other books, websites, and church streaming formation opportunities. We're not called to do all these things, but from these riches this is a time to pick just one or two that fit your current context and season of life.

This is a time for us, too, to devote ourselves to fellowship: through phone calls and the online coffee hour on Tuesdays at noon, through email and the USPS. This is a time to check in on our friends, on our neighbors, on our families, far and near, beloved and estranged, to let each one know they are loved and cared for.

This is a time for us to devote ourselves to the breaking of bread. While we fast for the Holy Eucharist, we can pay attention to our daily meals and the prayers that surround them. During this season Kitchen of Hope, the food pantry ministry of St. Thomas', is dramatically increasing its own operations to meet the increased need for food as people suffer the ill economic effects of the pandemic. You can talk to Vivian Hanson or Deacon John to find out how to devote yourself, in a safe way, to this critical work of loving our neighbors.

This is a time for us to devote ourselves to the prayers. It's time to pick up that Book of Common Prayer and find the pieces that are useful to you and how to use them. Did you know you can find a recording of the office of Morning Prayer each day, Monday through Saturday, on the St. Thomas' website? Did you know you can log in online to participate live in Compline, bedtime prayers, with our neighbors at St. Stephen's, Mullica Hill each weeknight at 9pm? Have you been tuning in to the weekend liturgies at St. Thomas', or elsewhere in our Diocese, or at the National Cathedral? All of these are opportunities to be encouraged, enriched, and embedded into the kind of life that Jesus, the gatekeeper, invites us into.

I wonder: to what new or renewed practice of devotion is Jesus calling you during this strange season? While we can lament the things we miss, what are the opportunities and the challenges being laid before us to invite us to a new spirituality, a new faithfulness, a new joy in life as God's people?

5 Conclusion

My father-in-law doesn't keep sheep any more. But he still has plenty of cows. Not Texas Longhorns that could gore you by accident even when social distancing. He keeps St. Gertrude's: they're red and they have a hump. If you're looking for a red humpy cow, I can show you where to find them.

In 1 Peter we read that all of us like sheep have gone astray. But Jesus, the good shepherd, has come looking for each of us personally. The fact that you are hearing (or reading) this sermon right now means that Jesus has found you and is inviting you to something new and good.

Jesus is the gate. Unlike the thief, he is here to take care of you. Unlike all the marketers trying to make your life "better" by making you beholden to them, Jesus has one purpose: that *you* "may have life, and have it abundantly."

Amen.