

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Easter 4-B (25 April 2021)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

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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 4:5-12, 1 John 3:16-24, John 10:11-18, Psalm 23

1 Of shepherds

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is always Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year we read Psalm 23, and every year our Gospel lesson comes from the tenth chapter of John's Gospel, where Jesus calls himself the good or noble shepherd.

To Jesus and his original listeners, these words would have had more layers of meaning than they might for us today. There was a funny ambiguity about the role of a shepherd. Shepherding was a low-wage, low-respect job that took one far from both human society and human comforts of home and hearth. Shepherding was also the occupation of the patriarch Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of Moses and of King David. Kings in particular, both "good" or noble ones and also corrupt and craven ones, were often called "Shepherds of Israel" and Jesus' claiming of the title "shepherd" would not go unnoticed or unremarked by anyone around him. It would be like using that synonym for shepherd, "pastor," in a church setting today: it carries certain ideas that extend beyond the care of mutton. Even more in his time, Jesus was claiming his place as a thought leader, one with both responsibility and authority, even one who reigns in kingly fashion over those who recognize his government.

Jesus contrasts the dedication of a shepherd with that of a hired hand – that is, someone without an ongoing relationship to the sheep, but who is brought in to do a particular job and expects to be paid for it. It's not a vocation or a calling, but a short-term contract. If the hired hand encounters opposition or difficulty, if a wolf threatens the hire hand's personal well-being, that hired hand will not think twice about the sheep in his care, but will cut them loose and flee.

You can hear this distinction in play in our first reading this morning. Peter and John had been arrested the day before. Now they are brought before the "rulers, elders, and scribes." Peter addresses them with those terms, "Rulers of the people and elders." These are, theoretically, those who should be shepherds to God's people. They have positions of authority and the gravitas of age and experience. But Peter's argument calls them out as hired hands. He points to the ridiculous situation in which he and John were arrested for the crime of healing someone that no one else could help. These hired hands are not looking out for the welfare of the people, but for their own status, authority, and power, which are threatened by these Galilean fishermen, country bumpkins, acting in the name of Jesus. Peter tells them the name of Jesus is the only name given under heaven by which they might be saved: whether from their sins or from the lunacy of caring more about the optics of a situation than the health and well-being of the 40-year-old man who was healed.

2 Love in Truth and Action

The actions of Jesus, on the other hand, are different, distinct from the actions of the rulers of the people and the elders. Jesus has no fear of death or shame because they cannot stick to him. Jesus acts fearlessly on behalf of humankind, whom he loves, rather than litigating the details of what is permissible or politic. In our second reading, the author John, probably the same John as the writer of the Gospel, says it is not in the fancy words or the symbols of office that we know love, but in the actions of Jesus, who laid down his life for us. That is how we know Jesus loves us and that is the example we are to follow if we are to be genuine in loving others. John asks, “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?”¹

John calls upon us to love, “not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”² This is the kind of love that gives us confidence in the ways we walk and makes us bold to make our own needs known to God. This is why ministries like Kitchen of Hope and Family Promise are so important to our identity as a church. We can gather together to sing and pray and speak fine words. We can offer peace to one another, recite the creed, and say the Lord’s Prayer. We can practice sacramental acts which are all good and important and effective. But John asks, if we’re not loving our neighbors with deeds as well as words, with food and shelter and the different goods that the youth and Sunday School procure with Love for Lent donations and other fund-raisers. It is in these practical, effective works of meeting others’ needs, the same needs we share with them, that we discover the presence of God and see the truth in all the things we speak and practice in worship.

When I hear John’s question about God’s love abiding in us, I think about the hard realities of life that I’d really rather not face. I think about the widespread poverty and hunger of our neighbors in Camden, in Philadelphia, and in Millville, not to mention right here in Glassboro. I think about the injustice, inequality, discrimination and straight-up racism that continue to plague our country for generation after generation. I think of the utter ridiculousness of whole cities like Flint, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Buffalo who choose not even to provide clean, lead-free drinking water to their residents. You can tell the hired hands from the shepherds because, the hired hands are content to live with injustice, with poisonous waters, preferring the status quo to the hard, sacrificial work of caring for their sheep and making the world a better place. Change is costly and uncomfortable. Shepherds will do the hard work, while hired hands leave well enough alone, even when it is neither “well” nor “enough.”

There were false shepherds and false prophets like this in ancient Israel. They were kings and soothsayers whose philosophy was concerned with taking care of number one. They said exactly what their benefactors’ “itching ears wanted to hear.”³ They arranged conditions to benefit those with power, money, and status. It was an arrangement of, “I’ll scratch your back and you scratch mine.” This was unfortunate, because that was precisely not whom God had commissioned these shepherds to care for. The rich can take care of themselves. It was for the sake of the poor and the powerless, to care for those unable to care for themselves adequately, that these rulers had been established by God. So finally God, especially through the prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah, declared that we would get rid of these useless shepherds and that he would shepherd Israel personally.

So Jesus declares, “I am the good shepherd.” God put on flesh, God stepped into the role of those useless prophets and those useless kings, and God said, “I am the good shepherd.”

¹1 John 3:17 NRSV

²1 John 3:18b NRSV

³2 Timothy 4:3

3 Following Jesus

I was heartened this week to read a news article about our own state's efforts to fix the pipes in Newark, NJ. The mayor of Newark, together with the county executive of Essex County, have done in two years what took other cities ten years, and still others seem to be on the 30-year plan, if that.

So are we called to follow Christ, to be shepherds to our neighbors, not hired hands. We do that through our ministries of food and shelter and giving. We do that by welcoming and sharing and caring. We do that by celebrating the resurrection of Christ, week in and week out, and proclaiming to our neighbors a story of life that conquers every threat of death, physical or emotional.

Jesus is the good shepherd, the one who knows his sheep and whose sheep know him. The Church exists to make those introductions, to guide us into that relationship so that we can know Jesus intimately and well. Because the secret of Christianity is that the place God chooses to reveal God's self, more often than not, is among the people we didn't know, the ones the hired hands wouldn't care for. We worship God, we practice listening to God's voice, so that we can hear it more clearly as we serve our neighbors and learn to recognize God's presence in each one. Because finally, it is only together with our neighbors, that God will lead us into green pastures, settle us beside still waters, and reveal to us the joys of everlasting life.

Amen.