

Sermon for May 3, 2020

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Sermon Texts: Acts 2: 42-47 and John 10: 1-10

Sermon Title: *Saved from what?*

PRAYER OF INVOCATION: Loving Shepherd, gather us this morning to your divine heart because thieves, bandits, and wolves are close at hand. Deliver us from evil, temptation, and greed. Help us build a community where all may have enough to eat, a secure place to live, and life abundant. Distinguish us as your flock as we study and pray together and share our possessions with those in need. Amen.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION: Holy Spirit, come. Come to us as Holy Light, and illumine us; come as Holy Wind, and cleanse us; come as Holy Truth, and lead us; come as Holy Fire, and burn in us; come as Holy Live and dwell in us. Amen.

The Christian Church has traditionally recognized the Fourth Sunday of Easter as Good Shepherd Sunday. The image of the shepherd is stamped firmly in our thinking, from the beautiful imagery of the Lord as Shepherd in the 23rd Psalm to Jesus telling the story of the shepherd who left his 99 sheep to go in search of the one that was lost. Jesus drew upon the imagery so familiar to him from Hebrew Scripture. Abraham was a keeper of great flocks. Moses was tending a flock when God called him into service. David was a shepherd boy, and Isaiah spoke of the coming Messiah by saying: *“He will feed his flock like a shepherd! He will gather his lambs into his arms.”* In today’s Gospel reading Jesus calls himself a shepherd, the one who calls his sheep by name to safety and pasture.

Sheep, I’ve learned are easily lost and are known for falling into crevices or wobbling over cliffs. When they are lost, they call out in a little bleating voice that will call a predator to them and hasten their demise. In King David’s day, shepherding was an honorable profession, but in 1st century Palestine, shepherds were as generally despised as the flocks they shepherded. Much of the former pastureland was now in the hands of the wealthy and used for crops that wandering sheep would eat, trample, and destroy. Shepherds were at the bottom of the social scale because of Jewish rituals of cleanliness. It’s interesting that Jesus would use the metaphor of the shepherd as the one to follow for abundant life.

It’s a apt metaphor, though, because the one characteristic that distinguishes sheep is that they know the sound of their shepherd’s voice. For thousands

of years, shepherds have gathered their flocks in rocky coves for protection. Typically, the shepherds station themselves at the sheep gate to prevent the sheep from wandering off and from predators, like wolves, from intruding. When morning comes, each shepherd calls his sheep and they go off to separate grazing lands. At each shepherd's call, his particular flock will disentangle itself from the larger flock and move out behind their shepherd. While this might not seem remarkable, it becomes quite so when you realize that there can be more than five thousand sheep gathered together in one nighttime flock.

Focusing on Jesus as the good shepherd and the one to follow through the gate to abundant life is a good image to focus on in these times when we are watching the institutions we have depended on and taken for granted failing or collapsing. The thieves and bandits in the past could be counted as payday lenders, those in the media who promise us health, wisdom, and peace if we buy this book or go to this seminar, or indeed any voice that seeks to steal our lives at the end of the day, while promising to show us the way and the truth.

Pandemics, the bubonic plague, and cholera, among other things, have a way of resetting the dial. Our Acts passage speaks of the Lord adding to the numbers of those who were being saved. Saved from what? At the time this passage was written, the Greek concept of the individualized soul had not yet taken hold in Christianity. Those hearing this passage would have heard it as a corporate salvation, the salvation of the community.

What is the community doing? After one sermon the congregation jumped from an apostolic band to a megachurch of 3000. The numbers grew daily. The economic button was reset. There is a radical economic transformation taking place. Not only did Christians fellowship and pray and break bread together, they also believed that they had all things in common. They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. One wonders why this communal style of life didn't take root and flourish.

I read a story of two little boys, aged 3 and 5, who were watching their mother prepare pancakes one Saturday morning. They were hungry and anticipating the warm butter and syrup dripping down the sides of a stack of fluffy pancakes. The mother saw this as a teaching moment. She said *"If Jesus were sitting here, He would say, 'Let my brother have the first*

pancake. I can wait.’’ The older brother turned to his younger brother and said, *“Dave, you be Jesus.”* It doesn’t take us very long to want to put ourselves first, and even those who are closest to us, last. We all seem to want someone else to have Jesus’ values while we get to the pancakes first.

However, when we emerge from this corona pandemic, we have the opportunity to support and to create institutions that have the good of the community, not wealth accumulation, as their primary goal. We have the opportunity to examine whether health care should be tied to employment, whether students should take on many tens of thousands of dollars of debt in order to get an education, whether workers like the clerks at the grocery, the cleaning staff, and teachers should be paid a realistic, living wage. I personally think that picking fruit is skilled labor. I don’t know about you, but I wouldn’t last an hour in a strawberry patch. If I have to pay \$15 for a Big Mac, maybe I’ll change my diet to a healthier one.

The danger of the bucolic imagery of white fluffy sheep frolicking on green hillsides is that the message loses its punch. That’s what we have done to Jesus’ message – we’ve tamed it to fit secular values. Jesus deliberately chose the image of the shepherd because it was dangerous, dirty, and menial work. A modern day equivalent might be *“I am the good sharecropper.”*

Jesus did not exclude people based on the standards of his day – lineage, status within community, or physical conditions or disease. John makes it clear that the work of gathering the flock means that we are to make a space where all are welcome. John imagines a community where all are united in their loyalty to Jesus Christ, gathering at the table, and celebrating the freedom, grace, and mercy available through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Most commentators I have read or listened to are pretty pessimistic about any changes that will come about in the months and years ahead. But, I am not.

We come to the Table this morning, not just for an individual spiritual experience, but also to be transformed by the presence of Christ in Holy Communion. As the Holy Spirit moves among us, the stage is set for those who are transformed to become witnesses to God’s presence among us. In our transformation we are called to examine our attitudes, our

behaviors, and to hear the voice of our Good Shepherd who insists that there is only one flock. Amen.