

Easter IV, 2023 – All Saints', San Leandro

The fourth Sunday of Easter always has a focus on Jesus the Good Shepherd – in all three years of the cycle of scripture readings we hear on Sunday mornings, we are presented with different aspects of this same image, the shepherd who is Christ, and the sheep – that would be us. Today is no different, the Gospel of John is about the good shepherd, the reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Peter concludes with a focus on the shepherd, Psalm 23 begins with a beloved image of being led by a shepherd “O my beloved, you are my shepherd...you renew my spirit, you restore my soul.”

But scripture scholars tell us they wish there were a few more verses in the gospel passage we hear today in year A – because – the point of the reading comes a little after the verse with which we end. If we continued just a few more verses, we would hear this:

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.” (verses 11, 14-15)

First we hear Jesus say “I am the gate for the sheep,” then “I am the gate” and here in these ‘extra’ verses “I am the good shepherd...” So which is it? Is Jesus the gate or the shepherd? You probably guessed it already, the answer is ‘yes’ – both.

I suspect that many of you have hung around the bible enough to know the importance of the “I am” statements – throughout the Old Testament there are several, most notably the meeting between Moses and God recorded in the book of Exodus (3:14), in which God presents as a burning bush. When Moses says that certainly the Israelites waiting for his return will ask “what is God’s name”, God, aka the burning bush, says “I am who I am” – “this is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.” (3:15). It is here, early on in scripture, that God reveals God’s name – and in Exodus God is not first and foremost what God does, but who God is – pure being, without beginning or ending.

But as we enter into the New Testament, the multiple “I am” statements of John’s gospel see a move from Jesus stating the reality of his very being to the specific roles he fills. Andrew McGowan calls these multiple “I am” statements a movement from obscurity to revelation in that Jesus reveals

more and more of himself throughout the gospel. What is it to be a sheepgate? It is to be the opening through which the sheep enter into temporary safety and a place of rest – safe from attack. It is perhaps to even literally become the gate – to lie down across the opening primarily to keep the wolves or other predators out. And what is it to be a shepherd – it is to bring the sheep to overnight rest, to sort out the injured as they go through the sheepgate so that they can be attended to – it is to notice if one is missing, and go back out to find them, it is to call one's own sheep by name after a night of being mixed in with others – so that they can be led to green pastures and fresh water, it is to forsake other sheep and to be willing to give one's life to keep these particular sheep safe.

Jesus the good shepherd says "I call them by name". Our names are important – they often immerse us in a family or a broader clan or tribe, they may embody a particular geographical or ethnic identity, or a direct relationship to our family (are we perhaps the second daughter, the third person in the family with this name, a name invented to be part of several other names)... Perhaps one's name is given by family members as aspirational (we hope you will be this), or reflective (we see this quality in you). Our names (or our nicknames) are a central part of our identity. My own name gives away a couple pieces of who I am – my French first name comes from my mother's French-Canadian heritage, my surname of Larsson from my Swedish father.

Or perhaps our name has been changed – by others or by ourselves, to make new connections-new family ties, or to uncover an identity always there but hidden from view. Names are at the heart of who we are. Christ calls us by name, and by this name we are known, in heaven and on earth.

Jesus the good shepherd says "I know my own and my own know me." Part of the name of each baptized person is the addition to their name of "Christian" – to be christened, christened, baptized, anointed is to be grafted onto the vine that is Christ, to be adopted and made a part of the household of God – to be Christ's own forever – made into a new person.

Jesus the good shepherd says "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Having been made a part of Christ, Christ promises abundant life. But this does not mean a life of safety, a life of health and wealth and wisdom. God does not promise safety, only that when suffering and danger comes, God will be there with us, as always.

The first letter of Peter which we read throughout Easter this year was written to instruct the newly baptized of the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century in how to live as Christ's own in the world. It seems at first read far removed from the promise of life abundant. The teaching talks about suffering because of being a follower of Christ – which is to follow in Christ's footsteps. Part of Jesus' role as the good shepherd is to corral us, to steer us away from cliffs, deep water, quicksand and toward green pastures and still waters. But Psalm 23 also uses the image of the shepherd's rod and staff – these were tools for correction, not for petting, to keep us on the path - and 1<sup>st</sup> Peter picks up on that in reminding the new Christians that “they had gone astray” - like sheep do - but they have returned to the shepherd and to the guardian of their souls, or been led through the valley of the shadow of death to arrive at a table prepared for the eternal banquet.

The danger of bearing the name “Christian” has been increasing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It seems difficult to believe, but there are more Christian martyrs in the past 80 years than in many of the earliest centuries of Christianity combined. While that same threat to our life for being a Christian is probably not a part of life in San Leandro or other towns nearby, to be a Christian is to often be pitied, ridiculed, deemed a bit crazy, or excluded from some circles. Our sojourn through the Acts of the Apostles often gives us a rosy picture of early Christianity “Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles... and day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” Sometimes the comparison to what feels like a shrinking church makes these readings seem long ago and far away. A number of Christian leaders have wondered if Christianity thrives best under duress – perhaps persecution is an essential element for this particular faith expression to flourish. Perhaps that is the case, the church is flourishing where life is more difficult.

The good news is twofold, however. First, Christianity continues to grow when viewed as a global phenomenon. And second, even in places where the church catholic – all of it – is not numerically increasing by leaps and bounds, there are individuals and communities who continue to grow in faith, in depth of understanding, in sharing their faith, in assisting those around them, in caring for the least in our midst.

In these 50 days of Easter we often sing or pray that “by Christ's death he has destroyed death” – that is the joy of Easter itself. But now we are

invited to join in that death of death by how we live, how we draw others in, how we carry out from this place the love of God for a hurting world. As those early neophytes – the newly baptized – heard preached to them in the letter of Peter “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.” May we follow Christ more deliberately in this holy season, perhaps praying with St. Richard of Chichester, that “we know thee more clearly, follow thee more nearly, and love thee more dearly.”