



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, APRIL 30, 2023
ACTS 2:42-47; PSALM 23; 1 PETER 2:19-25; JOHN 10:1-10

SHEPHERD AND SHEEP

John 10:1-10 *[Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”]*

In September 2021, Will and I spent several days in southwest Ireland, near Black Valley in the Kerry Highlands. It's rugged and remote and feels like time stands still there. The locals might agree – it was one of the last places in Ireland to get electricity, in 1976.

One afternoon we were walking in the valley, the hills on both sides covered with sheep, each with a bright pink or blue paint splotch to identify its owner. The wind was howling, but we heard the shepherd first, whistling from a distance. Then we saw two sheepdogs

patrolling, one up high and the other down low on the hills, and finally a man walking in the middle, directing the dogs as they moved the sheep along.

As we watched, an ancient Toyota land rover pulled up, driven by an elderly man dressed in a well-worn jacket and sweater and a frayed button-up shirt. He was watching the shepherd's progress, too, and we learned that he was his father, part of a long line of family raising sheep in the Black Valley. We talked a bit and the older shepherd commented, “you

can't give the wool away – no one wants it anymore.”

We asked if they were finishing up for the day, and he said, “No, my boy is after a couple sheep up in that gap. It's the same ones every time. Those few are more trouble than the whole lot of them.”

In our Anglican tradition, the 4th Sunday of Easter is “Good Shepherd Sunday.” The Good Shepherd is the church's earliest symbol for Christ, depicted in 3rd C paintings in the Roman catacombs of a man carrying a lamb on his shoulders with sheep at his feet. But lest we get too sentimental and gauzy about what that symbol means, I want to remember that matter-of-fact Black Valley shepherd. “It's the same ones every time. Those few are more trouble than the whole lot of them.”

And yet, he and his son, and their family before them, go out again and again to bring the stray sheep home. It is hard, never-ending work, but it is what they do. It is who they are.

In the 23rd psalm, God is the good shepherd, the one who ensures the sheep are fully alive, body and soul. The one whose faithfulness and care assures the flock that they are safe

and nourished. Not at a bare minimum, but with such abundance their earthly cups cannot hold all the divine goodness and mercy.

In John's gospel, Jesus paints a similar picture. The good shepherd knows his sheep by name and they know and follow his voice. He is the doorway to healing and safety and the guide to abundant life.

The theology of the Good Shepherd is about who God is, but it is also about the nature of the pasture and the flock, symbols for the world and for humanity. It affirms that all of creation is good, filled with enough beauty, refreshment, and shelter for all, and that all living beings are known and valued. It affirms that God's desire for creation is flourishing and freedom. And where there is danger or threat, God's desire is rescue and protection.

Jesus says, “I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly.” Salvation, being saved, means healing and wholeness – a return to God's original blessing of all of creation.

So it's a little disorienting that sandwiched between the 23rd psalm and the passage from John today, we encounter the first letter of

Peter. It's even more unsettling if we read the verse that comes before what we heard, the verse that begins this portion of the letter. That verse says, "Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle, but those who are harsh." And then, "It is a credit to you if you endure pain while suffering unjustly. God approves when you do right and suffer for it."

Wait. What? *This* is not abundant life. Not at all.

One option for a preacher would be to ignore this reading. To let it fade into the background of the life-giving story of the Good Shepherd. But we can't do that because this passage from 1st Peter can be dangerous. It was cited by pre-Civil War southern enslavers to justify slavery and cruelty as a God-given institution. It is used by patriarchal abusers to assert their divine right to control women and children through violence.

And some modern biblical commentaries continue to assert that "God's will for his people is to submit to our human authorities

– not out of fear or loyalty, but for Christ's sake,"¹ perpetuating the idea that the way we show our love for Christ, who suffered unjustly, is by enduring abuse and unjust suffering for ourselves.

That is *not* abundant life.

So we need context. This letter wasn't written by Peter, but probably someone in his community in the late 1st century. It is directed to Christians in Asia Minor whose social and religious identity make them exiles within a much larger non-Christian population.² They are going through perilous times of persecution and have no power to alleviate their suffering. The author is trying to encourage them to persevere, to remain faithful even though their faith is the source of their affliction. He reminds them, "you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls."

The early church was deeply rooted in the knowledge of God as the Good Shepherd,

the one who ensures abundant life for the flock. And, they lived in a culture dominated

¹ www.bibleref.com

² *The People's Bible*, p. 1699.

by the Greco-Roman household code, a hierarchy that gives the patriarch complete authority over his wives, children, and slaves. So in the face of danger, they are advised to hunker down and stay true to their identity and way of life. The consequences were likely not pleasant, but survival was essential.

The problem is not that this letter was written, but that its superficial message of submission to oppression has been applied to people who are not suffering due to their faith, but as a result of someone else's greater power and inclination to abuse it.

In this mistaken theology, God is not the Good Shepherd who desires abundant life for all, but the Offended Patriarch who demands restitution for the suffering of his son through the suffering of humanity. Salvation in this model is not healing or wholeness, but a transaction. Redemption bought with suffering.

That is not abundant life, and it is not the gospel. Yet those ideas may have been ones you encountered in your journey of faith. I am very sorry for that. That was wrong.

The fact is, we are not the early church, whose choice was between resistance and survival. This community has the agency and power to call out injustice, affirm that all undeserved suffering is against God's desire for creation and actively resist – and alleviate – that suffering. This community has the capacity and imperative instead to show in our lives that God desires flourishing and joy for all.

And that is possible because the Good Shepherd leads us. Like the sheep in the gap, we may be the ones who stray. We may be “more trouble than the whole lot of them.”

And yet, the Holy One goes out again and again to bring us home. It is what God does. It is who God is. Amen.