

Easter 4, Yr. A

May 3, 2020

Acts 2: 42-47. John 1:1-10

If you lived in the Middle East at the time of Jesus, a shepherd metaphor would have been something you immediately understood. I think it's an understatement to say that that's not true today. We've heard these scriptures for a long time and I think at least one response to them today is a bit of annoyance at being compared to sheep. Sheep are considered a bit dim. But it turns out that that's a rumor that was spread by cattlemen, because unlike cattle, which can be driven, sheep will insist, instead, on being led. Try to drive them and they'll just run around behind you. So, sheep prefer to be led. And if you think of that in terms of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, that's not a bad thing, as long as we are following him. We heard in John that the shepherd knows his sheep, he knows them each by name and they will follow only his voice.

If we look again at the metaphor a bit, it's maybe more apt for us to talk about shepherding as leadership. And to ask ourselves which voice we hear and which we follow.

We're bombarded by voices today, each one promising what sounds like the good life, or perhaps the abundant life that we heard about from the John reading. More about that later. But first, let's think more about

leadership. The shepherd as leader, the one who is willing to lay down his life for the sheep is the kind of leader we are supposed to be following. That kind of leader is motivated by genuine love for his or her followers, and not by self-interest or the desire for power or status. That kind of leader exhibits vision, courage, and care for all, especially the most vulnerable. As always, we must choose which voice we'll pay attention to, which leader we'll follow. The question to be asked is a simple one: is this person's leadership life-giving or not? Or in terms of the gospel, is this person leading us, not just some of us, but all of us, to a more abundant life?

That's the first question. The next obvious question is what did Jesus mean when he said he had come to bring abundant life? If you look up abundance in the dictionary, at least one definition, and usually the first one, has to do with wealth. But none of us will be surprised to find that that's not what Jesus was talking about. He was talking about the kind of life that is profoundly meaningful and fulfilling, the kind of life that is more than just existing. The kind of life that goes beyond surviving to thriving. I guess you could call it the Easter life because it's the kind of life you can live once you get, really get, that there is life after death and, because of that, this life, now, can be lived differently – generously, fearlessly, abundantly.

There's another metaphor in the Gospel, the one in which Jesus says he's the gate. Another way of thinking about a gate is that it's a threshold. A kind of in-between place. I like to read Fr. Richard Rohr's meditations in the morning and lately, he's been talked about thresholds, only he uses a different term; he calls them liminal spaces – they are in-between. In between one way of understanding the world and a new way; in between an old way of living and a new one. We all have experienced these liminal, these in-between spaces when our former ways of understanding and doing things are challenged, sometimes turned completely upside down. Sometimes these are negative times: loss of a job, loss of a loved one. Sometimes they occur at good times: the birth of a child, or a new relationship, or even retirement. What they have in common is that threshold quality, that sense of the opportunity of stepping into something new. In those times, we're open in a whole different way because we aren't in control, we're more humble and ready to learn, we're teachable, as they say.

I think that's the space the disciples were in. We heard about them today in the Acts reading. But what we heard this morning is very different from what we've been hearing these past weeks. Earlier readings show them as fearful, as deserters, as hiding out in the upper room, as confused and doubtful. One of the best descriptions I've

heard is that they were such a mess they couldn't have organized a one-car funeral. And yet, when we come in today, they have somehow gotten it all together. What made the difference? Surely it was the risen Jesus walking across the threshold into that upper room, offering them peace, showing them two things: first that his message that love was stronger than hate and hope stronger than fear, was vindicated by God raising him from the dead; and second, because of the assurance of the resurrection, they came to understand that they could live totally different lives; one could call them Easter lives. And that led them across the threshold to lives that were full of understanding, love, sacrifice, generosity. They got it. They understood what Jesus had been talking about all that time. They had suffered, been confused, but then were led across that threshold to whole new lives.

We're in a situation today that I think you could describe as one of those liminal times because of the covid virus. There's no normal out there. But perhaps there's a silver lining here. This virus has brought a lot of questions to the forefront. Like some of the things we've been talking about. Which voice do I follow? What is an abundant life? What really matters? What is Jesus calling me to do?

We've learned a lot in these past weeks. We have a new appreciation for those people who have been on the front lines while we shelter at home. We certainly acknowledge

the dedication and heroism of the medical professionals. But there are also all those people who have perhaps been invisible before, people like hospice workers, and home health care folks, or teachers, or those who provide child care, or all the people in the food chain, from farmers to the workers in the field and factories or processing plants, to the truck drivers and stockers at the grocery store. And now that we have seen them, and realized how dependent we are upon them, we should also see that many of them are working for less than a living wage, without health care, or safety nets. And seeing that, it's clear which steps beyond the threshold Jesus wants us to take. Out of this time of challenge can come new understandings, leading to the kind of change that justice and love require.

I would like to close with a story that came to me over the internet. I am guessing that we're all getting these posts: some funny, some inspiring. This one falls into that latter category. It's about a young man who was injured by a bomb in Afghanistan, losing both arms and both legs. He has since recovered and has become an author and speaker. His world was certainly turned upside down by his injuries. He told his wife she should leave him but she said, no she was staying. Then, while he was wondering why he hadn't just died, he was visited by another amputee who gave him the encouragement he needed by

assuring him he'd be fine. And ultimately, he was: artificial arms and legs, but a spirit of abundance, that overflows into that message that he shared with others: you too can do this; you too will be fine, you can still live life to the fullest. He was on that threshold, standing in that liminal space and he opted for an attitude of grace and generosity in spite of that incredible adversity and suffering that he had endured.

He didn't speak any overtly religious language, but he certainly heard the life-giving voice of God and was led accordingly. He's leading that life of Easter confidence.

To close this morning, I'd like to pray the collect for the day, which encapsulates what I have been saying: 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. Amen.