

Easter 4 C: May 8, 2022  
All Saints', Littleton, NH  
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Acts 9: 36-43  
Psalm 23  
Revelation 7: 9-17  
John 10: 22-30

### Mother's Day/Good Shepherd Sunday

This fourth Sunday after Easter each year is known as 'Good Shepherd' Sunday because in all 3 years of the lectionary we hear lessons related to Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The notion of the Holy One as the Good Shepherd is actually woven through the Old Testament with references to God and to Kings. King David was referred to as shepherd of his people, God was likened to a shepherd, and this morning we heard the penultimate reference to God as shepherd when we used the old version of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm—it is reflected in some of our hymns this morning too. The idea of a shepherd would have been a common and well-known image to an agrarian people for whom their livelihood and wealth was reflected in their flocks. Though the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm was originally written for a Jewish audience thinking of God/Yahweh, Christians also think of Jesus as the shepherd of this Psalm.

And in Christian theology and iconography, Jesus is both Shepherd and lamb. The notion of him as the 'lamb of God' is strongly embodied in the book of Revelation, as it was in our reading this morning. The 'lamb' of course, refers to the lamb that was sacrificed at Passover for the sins of the world, and Jesus became that innocent lamb for us. In the passage from Revelation there is that wonderful juxtaposition of images of his blood making the robes of the faithful white. The image, of course, evoking the cleansing power of Christ's blood.

In the gospel passage it is winter and he is walking in the Portico of Solomon at the Feast of Dedication, we know as Hannukah. The "Jews" gather around him to ask him to tell them if he is or is not the messiah. Now we must remember that when the gospel of John was written, late in the first century, there was already a

break between Jews and the nascent Jesus movement, so John, some decades after these events, could see them as 'other' from the early Christians. But at the time this story happened Jesus and all his followers were Jews, so referring to 'the Jews' at the time of this story is a bit misplaced.

Jesus says to them that he has told them by the works that he has done, but he doesn't call himself Messiah. The problem with calling himself 'messiah', he knows, is that this word is such a politically loaded term. When they hear or think Messiah, they think of a conquering general like king David who will defeat the Romans and throw them out of Judea. He does not want to give them the wrong impression. His way of 'conquering' is a different way. He says they do not believe because they are not his sheep; that his sheep hear his voice and understand him....and he gives them eternal life in an eternal kingdom. His last statement is the one that will haunt him in the religious-political sphere: that he and God are one. This will be heard as blasphemy by the religious establishment.

But, as we know, Jesus was talking about a different kind of kingdom and a different way of knowing God. And his sheep hear his voice. I think I've told you before that there are several sites on *Youtube* that show how sheep really do know the shepherd's voice. I saw one where a shepherd took some visitors to the edge of a field and told them to call to the sheep. The sheep did not respond, but when the Shepherd called, they all came running. This was the image that Jesus was invoking—encouraging us to practice listening for the shepherd's voice so we know it well!

I know that what I am about to say may sound a bit like proto-gnosticism—that there is some esoteric knowledge and way of knowing Jesus for those with some sort of special initiation, but that is not what I am trying to say. God knows that the Christian faith has been interpreted and abused by many over the centuries. The worst abuse is when people have used it as a means of controlling others by rules and systems and ecclesial power. But the truth is that we all have access to him if we but listen....and listening is just another way of saying prayer. Each one of us, by simple devotional practice can learn to hear his voice and follow him.

In the season of Easter where we typically have an Old Testament reading in the service, it is replaced by readings in the Book of Acts; which is the story of the development of the early Jesus movement, known as 'The Way'. In the reading this morning we hear of Peter who has finally learned to hear the master's voice and is

following him all over the region where he is being led. In this reading he is in Lydda which was not far from Joppa, where a disciple, Tabitha had just died. Joppa, a port city in Israel, is now called Jaffa, and is incorporated into greater modern Tel Aviv. The disciples in Joppa heard that Peter was in nearby Lydda and called for him. Peter came and performed a miracle that was very much like the miracle that Elijah performed in the book of First Kings, and Jesus' raising of Jairus' daughter. The writer, in telling the story, was mirroring these stories in form and character. The point was to show how the disciples were empowered as the prophets of old and Jesus.

But let's take note of Tabitha and who the story says she was. We don't know a lot about her, but we know her name, which, for scripture, is saying something, because often the names of women were not recorded in the Bible. But Tabitha was beloved. And she had a wonderful epitaph for her tombstone as reflected in the reading: "She was devoted to good works and acts of charity." She knew the shepherd's voice and responded.

Today is Mother's Day, and may I wish a happy Mother's Day to all moms. In recent generations, it really has been the moms who have been responsible for making sure that children were brought up in the faith. This is not true for everyone, but mostly in our culture it is perceived as a women's role with children.... And I hasten to add that it shouldn't be. Mom's, I suppose, are ones who we have learned listening from, mostly by example--they have had to listen to us whine for a long time. And listening is the grace that helps us to learn the shepherd's voice.

When we hear his voice:

- We lie down in green pastures, and beside still waters
- He restores our soul
- When death surrounds us, we fear no evil
- We are invited to a banquet, we are anointed, our cup runs over
- And goodness and mercy follow us all our days

As we grow in grace and in love with our Shepherd, our faith deepens, our joy deepens, and we grow more and more attached to the shepherd and strain to hear his voice. There is a peace that passes all understanding in this relationship.