

John: 4: 1-10
I Peter2: 19-25
Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23

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St. Peter's Glenside
Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year A
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The Good Shepherd

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable to thee, O Lord my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

Good Morning, St. Peter's friends and family. And a special welcome to all of you who may be joining us remotely for the first time, or, the first time in a very long time. I'm Laura Palmer, priest associate at St. Peter's Glenside. I'm glad you're here.

Even if you've never spent much time around cattle and sheep, I'm betting you have seen enough movies to know that when a cowboy is herding cattle, he's charging *behind* them, waving his whip in the air.

But a shepherd *leads* his sheep. Sheep will not be chased, only led. They panic easily and are prone to butting heads for no reason. Sound like anyone you know?

For the record, and I want you to know that I've been looking into this this week, sheep are not dumb. How this fake news has spread, I don't know. I do know that they grow close to their shepherd, recognize his voice, and will follow where he leads.

It's still true in Palestine today as it was a millennium or two ago, that when it's time for Bedouin shepherds to bring their flocks home, after grazing around the water hole with many others, the shepherd whistles or blows a tune on a reed pipe and the sheep gather behind him to follow him home.

"They know who they belong to; they know their shepherd's voice, and it is the only one they will follow," writes Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor who helped teach me about sheep this week in her book, *The Preaching Life*.

Early in my chaplaincy training years ago I remember a patient well into his 90s who was severely demented drifting between this world and the next. I was asked to see him, but since he couldn't speak, I read to him.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...." I began and within another phrase or two, he began singing the 23rd Psalm, a solo from his soul that glimmered beneath the crush of his dementia.

His soul recognized the words of his shepherd who was calling out to him through me.

This is at the heart of our gospel reading today. We are known and claimed by Jesus, known beyond our egos and identities, our denominations and our creeds.

But truth be told, the only ones among us excited about being a sheep are baaing to be in the Christmas pageant.

Being part of a flock even metaphorically, makes us uncomfortable and cuts against the grain of our rugged American individualism. We want to stand out rather than muddle along.

Until now. Aren't we all looking for a good shepherd to lead us out of our quarantined pens into greener pastures? Beside still waters? Trapped in a time rampant with fear, comfort is a deep yearning for all of us now. Rescue us, bring us home. Maybe, just maybe, in lives now stripped bare, we can recognize what has always been there:

As the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann notes in *the Message of the Psalms*:

"It is God's *companionship* that transforms every situation. It does not mean that there are no deathly valleys, no enemies, but they are not capable of hurt. Psalm 23 knows that evil is present in the world, but it is not feared. Confidence in God is the source of a life of peace and joy."

John makes sure we know that Jesus is the gate. But to me, that does not mean that Christ is *the only way*— especially in times now when anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are on the rise.

Again, in learning more this week what 1st century Palestinians already knew, was that there is only *one way* in to the fold where a flock spends the night. So anyone else, who didn't come through the gate, would have snuck in another way and been up to no good, like a thief or bandit and not to be trusted.

Just a few weeks ago, we were outside the tomb with Mary and who was the first to encounter Jesus, who she mistook for the gardener. Gail O'Day, a professor at the Candler School of Theology writes this in *Women's Bible Commentary*:

When Mary listens to the voice of the risen Christ, her perspective on the events in the garden changes. She no longer understands the empty tomb as a manifestation of death, but as testimony of the power and possibilities of life. In John's parable of the shepherd, Jesus said "The shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...The sheep follow him because they know his name. Jesus called Lazarus by name to summon him from the tomb and now his voice summons Mary to new life.

All we need to do, I believe is listen which is hard to do most of the time, but our ears may be more finely attuned now. Be gentle with yourself in your listening, reminds author and theologian Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor:

If sometimes you have trouble hearing the voice of your shepherd, be patient with yourself—because some days it sounds like a whistle and some days like a cluck; some days it sounds like a love song and some days like a curse. It is not a voice that always speaks in words, much less complete sentences, but it can usually be heard sometime between your getting up and your lying down each day, leading you beside still waters, restoring your soul.

The other evening while on walk, I was savoring the splendor of bright green grass and chartreuse buds on trees juxtaposed with sweeping borders of tulips in bold and striking colors. Fading sunlight was interspersed between the clouds and I realized that I was being restored as if I was lying down in green pastures and was beside still waters.

Shortly before she died from a brain tumor, Hannah, a spunky thirteen year-old girl and star soccer player asked me a question. If her mother lived until she was in her 80s, and then came to heaven, how would they recognize each other?

I'd never been asked a question like that before nor have I been since. After a long pause I said to Hannah that when you really, really, love someone, you'll recognize each other's souls.

Listen for your shepherd, in the voice of love, however that may be known to you. For love is the vocabulary of true speech and calling us all home.

AMEN