

Acts 9: 3-43
Psalm 23
Revelation 7:9-17
John 10: 22-30

The Reverend Laura Palmer
St. Peter's Glenside
May 8th, 2022
Year C 4 Easter

The Shepherd's Voice

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

Years ago in a hospital I was paged to see an old man. He was well into his nineties and swallowed up by dementia. I had my prayer book with me and unsure of what to do, began by reading Psalm 23. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...." Barely a few verses in, he began singing; singing, the 23rd Psalm as purely and sweetly as a flute.

The moment took my breath away. We knew nothing about each other and never would. But we recognized each other in our belonging. Something in his soul recognized what his mind could not. It was a momentary, but mystical communion. We were strangers to each other who belonged to the same flock that recognizes the voice of the same shepherd.

Because that's what sheep do. They will only follow a voice they've come to know. A hundred sheep can be gathering at the same water hole, but when their shepherds call them, they divide up and return to their own. And like most mothers, shepherds can identify whether their sheep are bleating in pain or in comfort. Stubborn and prone to panic, sheep can't be pushed or herded from behind like cows by cowboys galloping on horseback. Sheep can only follow, the one to whom they belong.

Too often we trip ourselves up by succumbing to the cliché of the blankie Jesus, holding and cuddling his meek little lambs. We cheat ourselves when we ignore what this text has to teach: Belonging matters most of all and can precede believing. "You do not believe, because you do not belong." Jesus says harshly. Start with the relationship, like the sheep, be part of the flock and let belonging lead you to believing.

It feels counter intuitive because it is. But Jesus was *always* upending traditional power structures. How often do we forget our minds can be dangerously tyrannical and oppressive? What a radical idea to belong first and let belief follow. It's relational. When Jesus said to "Love the Lord with all your soul, with all your heart and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself," he was describing a web of love and relationships conditional on belonging, not rules, creeds, or dogma deciding who's out and who's in. He was talking about belonging when he gave the commandment he saw as greatest of all.

The context for today's gospel reading occurs in the Temple, at the Feast of the Dedication which today we call Hanukkah. Jesus' followers are gathered round, hounding him to cut to the chase, end the suspense. "If you're the Messiah, tell us." But Jesus doesn't. As Barbara Brown Taylor points out in *The Preaching Life*; "Jesus seemed to know that the question itself was a problem, that if they had to ask it all, they would not believe the answer." After all, they knew his preaching, they heard or witnessed the healing miracles he'd performed, and if they were still clueless, how was saying, "Yes, I'm the Messiah" going to do anything but making him a greater threat to the Roman emperor who will soon order his death.

The theologian Paul Tillich famously said, "Accept the fact that you're accepted." You are already in the flock if you're baptized, or sitting in the pews of St. Peter's or if you're listening online. You have found a place of belonging, and everything flows from there.

But that doesn't mean we are free from fear, or that our never faith wavers, sometimes mightily, other times not. Writes Taylor in *The Preaching Life*:

Just because we believe does not mean that we are not afraid of what might happen to us; it just means that we believe we know who will be with us when it does. Some days we are as firm in our faith as apostles and some days we are like lost sheep, which means that we belong to the flock not because we are certain of God but because God is certain of us, and no one is able to snatch us out of God's hand.

That seems to me like very good news indeed.

In his moving reflection last week about what St. Peter's means to him, Rob DeKalb talked about coming to church again after years of being in a spiritual wilderness because his wife and daughters were. He liked the way St. Peter's made him feel. He kept coming back, "returning to the fold" were his words which is what sheep do. Not because he necessarily believed everything in the Nicene Creed, but (I think) because he'd found his flock. One thing led to another and a year later he was on the Vestry and now he's the People's Warden. Only the Holy Spirit knows what might happen next.

Rob's story points to something else about the Good Shepherd: each of us recognize his voice in a distinct way. In my life, more often than not, when I hear the voice of the shepherd it's in whispers. Barbara Brown Taylor adds; "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 the still waters, restoring your soul."

We are celebrating Mother's Day today in the same week a leaked memo from the Supreme Court affirms that women will no longer have the right to choose whether or not they are ready or able to be mothers when Roe vs Wade is overturned in June, as seems likely. The firestorm this has unleashed has been furious and swift.

What could this possibly have to do with the Good Shepherd? Absolutely nothing, I would have said until I read these words from our former presiding bishop, Frank Griswold. Fifteen years ago, in 2007, Bishop Griswold wrote: (at the installation of the Canadian Primate)

Out beyond ideas of wrong doing and right doing there is a field. I'll meet you there. Thus exclaims Rumi, the Sufi poet and mystic. The field is the "open place" of the psalmist. It is the pasture into which Christ the good shepherd leads his sheep. This field is the force field of the divine love which sustains the universe. We speak a great deal these days about communion. Are we in communion or out of communion? ... We speak of communion as if it were a human construction, as if it were something we have the power to bestow or withhold. In so doing we overlook the fact that communion is an expression of God's love: the love with which the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father in what St. Paul calls the "communion of the Holy Spirit."

May our Good Shepherd lead us all to the pasture of that divine love which sustains the universe and may we find a deeper communion with each other opening up new pathways for peace, justice and love. Why do we insist on tearing ourselves and our country apart when we all yearn for nothing more than to belong? If we listen for our shepherd's voice, we'll find that we already do? AMEN