

“The Shepherd’s Voice”
St. Paul’s UCC Church
May 8, 2022

Friends in Christ....

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Easter. Informally, it is known as “Good Shepherd Sunday” which is why the lectionary includes both the 23rd Psalm and John 11:22-30. We will hear the passage from John as our third scripture. Our second scripture tells the story of Tabitha/Dorcas in Acts 9:36-43. In Acts Tabitha/Dorcas is the only woman referred to in the Greek as a disciple in the Bible. Throughout her work making clothes for those in need she lives the Good News.

The 23rd Psalm is perhaps the best known and most loved text in the Bible. Even though it was written some 3,000 years ago, it still speaks to us today. We often hear it at funerals for its comforting message to family and friends who are experiencing the death of a loved one. Though I regularly use the Common English Bible, for today I will use the familiar King James Version of the text.

Psalms Lesson Psalm 23 (KJV)

23 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³ He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

⁵ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Scott Hoezee wrote: Psalm 23 is hands down the most famous poem in the Hebrew Psalter. People seem to read their own lives and experiences into this lyric little song. That is quite amazing given how foreign most of the imagery is. Then he asks: Have you ever met a shepherd? Spent any time with sheep? Has your head ever been actually anointed with oil? Have you ever had a feast while your enemies were forced to look on? If the answer to some or all of these questions is “No,” then we have to wonder why this unfamiliar imagery is nonetheless so familiar to us. How can something so foreign to our experience still resonate with our experience?

Probably it is because what underlies these words is something we all know deep in our bones: the need to be cared for. The need to be watched over. Granted, the George Gershwin ballad “Someone to Watch over Me” is all about romantic love but on a more general level, we know the feeling. “Tell me, where is the shepherd for this lost lamb? I’m a little lamb who’s lost in the wood I know I could, always be good to one who’ll watch over me . . .”

Maybe we feel this need the more acutely because sometimes it feels like there are not many shepherds around.

The very images of a shepherd, green pastures, and still waters (the still waters image is important because sheep will not drink from moving waters) coupled with thoughts of “dwelling in the house of the Lord forever” lend themselves toward reflecting on and drawing hope and strength from the promise of eternal life through the resurrected Christ. It is indeed a message of hope.

We move now to the lesson from Acts. It is a story of a resurrection of a woman disciple in the Mediterranean seaport of Joppa, which sits about thirty-five miles northwest of Jerusalem. After she dies, messengers go to Peter who they urge to come. We are not told any other details other than to come. Were they expecting a miracle? From Acts chapter 9:

Acts Lesson Acts 9:36-43 (CEB)

³⁶In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas). Her life overflowed with good works and compassionate acts on behalf of those in need. ³⁷About that time, though, she became so ill that she died. After they washed her body, they laid her in an upstairs room. ³⁸Since Lydda was near Joppa, when the disciples heard that Peter was there, they sent two people to Peter. They urged, “Please come right away!” ³⁹Peter went with them. Upon his arrival, he was taken to the upstairs room. All the widows stood beside him, crying as they showed the tunics and other clothing Dorcas made when she was alive. ⁴⁰Peter sent everyone out of the room, then knelt and prayed. He turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up!” She opened her eyes, saw Peter, and sat up. ⁴¹He gave her his hand and raised her up. Then he called God’s holy people, including the widows, and presented her alive to them. ⁴²The news spread throughout Joppa, and many put their faith in the Lord. ⁴³Peter stayed for some time in Joppa with a certain tanner named Simon.

Dorcas lived her faith by helping others. Apparently, she was a person with some means, as she made clothes for widows and probably helped them in other ways. Widows were on the lowest rung of society and relied on others for their survival. Dorcas emulated Jesus’ care for the least and was well-known in the community for her acts of charity.

No specific request was made of Peter initially and even after he arrived in the upper room where Dorcas’ body was. In fact, from the looks of things, it appears that perhaps they really did just want to honor Dorcas by having the lead apostle be present at the side of her casket. They showed Peter some of the clothing she had made and obviously informed him on how important she was to their community. And just possibly they did all that with the hopes that this would move Peter to take some action here, but we are not told that directly.

But, of course, Peter does decide to take action. It is probably about the boldest action an apostle could attempt to undertake, too—the woman had been dead for a while by the time he got there. No one thought she was merely comatose. She was dead. But Peter prayed and then

simply spoke to Dorcas/Tabitha, telling her to get up. And in a miracle more complex on the physical level than we sometimes appreciate, she did “wake up” and come back to life. What decay had happened in her body was reversed. Her brain, which had gone to useless mush by then, re-fired on every neuron. A few billion things happened at once in her body and she was back, as undeniably alive and herself again as she had been undeniably dead a few moments earlier.

The work of the church could have continued without Dorcas. Of course, the day finally came when it *did* continue without Dorcas as she surely died again eventually and this time no one raised her back up. But for this moment in the earliest days of the Christian community, Peter did raise her back to show everyone that in Christ, death has been defeated but also that in Christ, those who minister to the ones God loves so very dearly—the poor, the weak, the widowed, the vulnerable of any age and of all ages—are also dear to God and he desires to see that holy work continue. And many came to believe in Jesus.

Every church needs a Dorcas or Dorcases!

In our Gospel reading, the Jewish leaders ask Jesus to state plainly whether or not he is the Messiah. After all, he had been on the scene doing miraculous works and challenging the values and practices of the religious elite. It is not that Jesus is not explaining himself but what he is explaining a challenge to their authority. He did not fit their image of what a messiah should be.

Though there is no references to it, historically there were individuals that claimed to be the messiah. Some even attracted followers. But they all faded away. So the question was: Was Jesus another flash-in-the-pan? No, he was the Good Shepherd as he tells us in today’s Gospel lesson from John, Chapter 10:

Gospel: John 10:22-30 (CEB)

Jesus at the Festival of Dedication

²²The time came for the Festival of Dedication in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³and Jesus was in the temple, walking in the covered porch named for Solomon. ²⁴The Jewish opposition circled around him and asked, “How long will you test our patience? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.”

²⁵Jesus answered, “I have told you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father’s name testify about me, ²⁶but you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life. They will never die, and no one will snatch them from my hand. ²⁹My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them from my Father’s hand. ³⁰I and the Father are one.”

May God bless our hearings of his Holy Word. Amen.

Jesus as a Good Shepherd was an image that the people would have understood. Shepherds were extremely important to the well-being of a flock. They guided the sheep, they made them safe, and they led them to food and drink. Flocks would be co-mingled and to sort

them, the shepherd would call them, and they knew his voice. Jesus would have observed life around him including watching the relationship between shepherds and their flocks.

In the Jerusalem of Jesus' day, various flocks of sheep would arrive with the respective shepherds, only to be turned into the same sheepfold together. This made for a rather large gang of sheep, and there was not any practice of branding or marking to tell which was which. So how does each shepherd get his own sheep back?

Two ways. One, the shepherd knows all his own sheep by heart. He has a special name for each character in the flock. And second, the sheep themselves know their master's voice unmistakably. When the shepherd calls out, they simply get up and come to him. They follow him out through the sheep-gate.

If the people who were celebrating the Festival of Dedication (also known as Hanukkah) that year in Jerusalem had to ask Jesus if he would plainly fess up to being the Messiah, then Jesus was not going to answer. They either already knew Jesus was the Christ or they did not and if they did not, it was because they were refusing to make the logical connections between Jesus' work and his unity with God the Father. So, their query was one-part a trick question, one-part a prelude to exactly what does follow just beyond the fringe of this lection; namely, an attempt to kill Jesus for blasphemy.

So, Jesus' reply to their question really did amount to his saying, "If you have to ask, then I am not going to tell you!" They had no ear for a tune. They had no ability to hear the Good Shepherd's voice. Jesus could make any claim for himself that he wanted but they were not going to believe him, listen to him, or most certainly follow him. Their ears were not attuned to hear his message, their eyes were not sharp enough to see the Father who stood behind Jesus in every miracle.

And yet they had to ask their question—even if they asked it with cynicism and doubt abounding—because the truth is they *were* looking for a more typical world leader. They were looking for the dashing figure who was willing to put himself forward because they thought that was the only kind of Messiah who could stand a chance at routing Herod, Pilate, and finally the Caesar himself.

Jesus, however, came to point a different direction, telling us that the secret to life is the willingness to give life away, that sacrifice leads to new life, which dying leads to resurrection. Jesus came and provided so many signs that pointed to a different kind of kingdom. Those who wanted to be part of God's new order of things followed where those signs pointed. Those who were still hung up on worldly definitions of authority, prestige, and success—and who wanted to amass some of that for themselves—saw Jesus as a loser and as a non-starter. Nothing Jesus could have said would have convinced them otherwise, not even had he said plainly that day while strolling through Solomon's Colonnade, "Yes, I am the Christ."

Our being "sheep" does not mean that we blindly follow Jesus, but that we are actively pursuing a relationship with him by hearing his voice and heeding his words. Although following the Good Shepherd truly leads to eternal life, the way of discipleship is not easy.

However, nothing can interfere with Jesus' care for us. We are secure in his hands. We are never alone for he truly is the Good Shepherd.

Listen for The Shepherd's Voice. Amen.