

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 30 April 2023
Fourth Sunday of Easter - Year A

1st Reading: Acts 2:42-47

Psalm: 23

2nd Reading: 1 Peter 2:19-25

Gospel: John 10:1-10

Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø*

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Quite a few years ago, I heard a presentation that a seminary professor gave after he had made a trip to the Holy Land, and there was one detail of that presentation that really struck me. He said that he had met a bedouin shepherd who was out tending his flocks, just as a shepherd in Jesus' day would have done. The professor was curious, and asked the shepherd: "How long would it take for someone to learn how to become a good shepherd?" The man thought about it for a little bit and then gave his answer: "Three generations".

This was such a startling response that I have been intrigued by it ever since. Here in America, the land of opportunity, where any individual is supposed to be capable of achieving whatever goal one sets out to do, this type of thinking is pretty much unheard of, and yet... I suspect that some of the farmers among us might find that they agree with this idea.

It can take years to feel out what the weather and climate patterns are in an area, and then to understand what effects they have on the livestock. And the same is true just trying to understand the behavioural patterns of the animals themselves, especially when an integrated flock of sheep may be involved. Nor can you simply explain all this to someone else. They need to join you in your work in order to learn to sense it for themselves, over a lengthy period of time. So it does seem reasonable that this whole process of developing the expertise of shepherding could take generations to perfect.

Luckily, God has thousands of generations of experience dealing with his flock of humans. He knows our world from start to finish and he knows us inside and out. So when we hear Jesus say that he has come that we "may have life, and have it abundantly", it's a pretty good idea for us to trust him. Not only does he know what is best, but he cares for each one of us individually.

And he knows where to find each of us when we go astray, and to lead us back to where we should be, where we really do want to be - where we can be happiest, where we can feel fulfilled and loved, where we can do good for each other - so, yes, where we can have life, and have it abundantly.

But we also know that life is not always easy or comfortable. There are dangers, especially if we do wander from the fold. And there are also those who want to lead us astray, to do us harm, to take the life we have for themselves and leave us once we are used up for their benefit. Yes, there are people who fit that description, and Jesus describes them as thieves and bandits. But there are other forces in the world besides other human beings that we need to be wary of, dark forces that oppose God and the abundant life he wants to give. We may call them demons, as they are called in the New Testament, or we may have other words for them, but they do exist.

We know that there are diseases and other conditions in the world that threaten us. And we know that life can be full of sorrows and sufferings of various kinds. David, in our wonderful Psalm for today, assures us, however, that God is with us even in the valley of the shadow of death, even in the scariest and most painful moments of our lives, and he will care for us, guide us through our troubles, and then prepare a feast for us that we may have life, and have it abundantly.

Peter, too, knows that in life we suffer, and his entire first letter, one of the most read books in the early church, deals with this whole question of human suffering. He knows that we often bring pain upon ourselves - and that we should expect to be "beaten for doing wrong". But he also knows that we may suffer even when we do good, because of the actions of those thieves and bandits. So Peter writes: "It is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly." And if we do so, we "have God's approval", because "Christ himself suffered for us", giving us an example.

Peter gives us two reasons why we as Christians should accept our suffering, even when we have done good. The first reason, which he begins to explain in today's reading is that God sees our suffering. God knows what suffering is like, and Jesus, as God, suffered greatly, even though he had done no wrong. So when we suffer unjustly, God sees and blesses that suffering, and will use it for good, just as he used the suffering of Jesus for good, to save us. So Peter writes:

"When Jesus suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. ²⁴He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed."

And that leads us to Peter's second reason why we should accept suffering, because not only does God see, but others also see. Sometimes, just like Jesus, our suffering can be of direct benefit to others, and they can see that what we have done, even though most unpleasant, has helped them.

As an example, people who rescue others from a fire or a flood may themselves be swept away or die in the effort, and yet their giving of themselves *has* saved others. So we, like Jesus and like emergency rescuers, need not fear that such selfless efforts for the sake of others may lead to our pain or even our death, because we also have the hope and the promise of eternal life with our Good Shepherd. So Peter ends the passage we read today by saying: “You were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.”

And later in his letter Peter will tell us that because we have this hope, when others see us enduring suffering and putting our trust in God, and so may themselves turn to God. It is one of the ways that we as Christians can be witnesses in the world about the truths of God. So Peter writes:

“Even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear, nor be troubled, ¹⁵but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. ¹⁸For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.”

Because God is with us when we suffer, that suffering can serve to show others the goodness of God, who helps us through our difficult times. Peter is not saying that we should seek out suffering, to think that the more we suffer the better, but when we are in difficult situations, we can endure our hard times because God will bring us through them, and will ultimately give us eternal life, without any more pain or trouble.

Sheep may be able to sense danger, but they don't understand what those dangers are better than an expert shepherd understands. So the shepherd who truly takes care of his flock will do his best to calm the sheep and lead them past those dangers and into the safety of the fold. We, too, may be fearful of what may happen to us, but God knows so much better than we do what is good for us, and what will bring us through even the valley of the shadow of death, to the table he has prepared for us, where life and goodness are so abundant that our cups of blessings are running over.

So we can listen to the voice of Jesus and know that he is caring for us, comforting us with his guiding rod and staff, leading us to green pastures where we will have life, and have it abundantly. And we know this because he himself has already passed through the worst place imaginable and by suffering death has defeated death.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

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