

4 Easter, Year B, April 26, 2015, St. Mary & St. Timothy, Sylvan Lake
Acts 4:5-12; Ps. 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18;

There are two themes running through our lessons today, one is conflict and controversy between Jesus or his disciples and the religious authorities, and the other is that of God or Jesus as shepherd.

In the reading from Acts the conflict between Jesus' disciples and the religious authorities still concerns the healing of the man who was lame from birth and whom Peter healed through the power of Jesus' name. In last week's reading, Peter was calling the people worshipping in the Temple to repent for going along with Jesus' crucifixion recognizing that they did so out of ignorance, and he asserts that God raised Jesus from the dead so that there is the possibility of repentance, if they choose.

He continues speaking to them until the priests, the captain of the Temple guard and the Sadducees show up and have them taken into custody for claiming that in Jesus there is resurrection from the dead. Today's reading finds them the next morning being questioned by the rulers, elders and scribes with the high priest and members of the high priest's family sitting in judgment on them. By what power did you accomplish this healing, they ask. And Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, speaks boldly to them: Rulers of the people and elders if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.

That sounds to our ears somewhat exclusive of other beliefs and the people who hold them, but Peter is asserting this claim in the face of disbelief about anything Jesus had said or done. He is claiming that Jesus stands firmly in the tradition of the Hebrew scriptures and is attested to there. No wonder they thought his speech was bold. And

this is the same kind of boldness that is needed now in our own time to invite people to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ.

At Michael Harvey's workshop on Creating a Culture of Invitation we examined a lot of reasons people give for not inviting other people to hear the gospel or for not sharing it with others. It turned out that these reasons had more to do with what God does if we are faithful than they did with what we are supposed to do. They have a lot to do with fear of failure and rejection and not much to do with being faithful. Peter was being faithful in telling about Jesus Christ and leaving the results up to God.

The gospel reading is also set in a conflict, this time between Jesus and the religious authorities over the healing of a man blind from birth. You can read that in chapter nine of John's gospel. The religious authorities have thrown the man out of the synagogue because he questions whether they know as much about God as they think they do, and they don't approve of Jesus healing someone on the Sabbath. Jesus tells them they are blind to God.

Then he goes on to talk about those who attempt to shepherd the sheep without being the shepherd. He refers to himself as the door or gate of the sheepfold. And then we come to today's reading where he speaks of himself as the good shepherd. The good shepherd is distinguishable from all other shepherds by the fact that he lays down his life for the sheep. Hired hands don't cut it. They don't care about the sheep, only about their own safety, so they run away from anything that threatens the sheep.

The good shepherd knows his own sheep, and the sheep know him in the same way that the Father knows Jesus and Jesus knows the Father. Jesus' sheep know his voice. He says there are other sheep not of this fold and he must bring them also, so they too will listen to his voice. He says repeatedly that he is the one who lays down his life for the sheep and that he does it voluntarily. No one makes him do it. Also he has power to lay down his life and power to take it up again. He has this command from his Father.

This saying of Jesus reminded me of a little story I read about a monk being threatened with death by someone wielding a knife. The monk was not afraid and the person wielding the knife said you should be afraid because I have the power to kill you. The monk said, ah, but I have the power to allow you to do it. That's a different view of power than is current in our world but it is the same view that Jesus has of the power of God in the world. We often think that if God is omnipotent, all-powerful, God should do what we think God should do and are angry with God when God doesn't do what we want. But the understanding of power that goes with God's omnipotence is the one found in Ps. 115 vs. 3: Our God is in the heavens and he does whatever he pleases. Notice: whatever God decides to do, not what we decide God should do.

So Jesus is the good shepherd of all the sheep, regardless of who they are or where they come from, and lays down his life for the sheep. He is saying that the religious authorities, who think they are the shepherds of the sheep, do not understand their relationship with God or the sheep, and they certainly don't understand Jesus' relationship with God or the sheep.

Then there is Psalm 23. This is so familiar that we hardly think about what it might be saying to us and how it might be addressing us as those who are tended by God. Although written in the first person like many other psalms, just like those other psalms it is a corporate or communal psalm, said or sung in corporate worship. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. God supplies all our needs. The images describe a journey. The shepherd leads the sheep into pastures of rest, by still waters for refreshment, in the paths of righteousness, through the valley of the shadow of death, and into the presence of enemies.

I came across an article that offered different translations for certain Hebrew words in this psalm. For instance, the word translated 'paths' means a well-defined, almost trench-like path, a definite groove or rut in the earth. The word translated as 'surely' can be read as 'only'. The word translated as 'follow' more properly means 'to chase, to hunt, to pursue.' The word translated as 'dwell' also has the meanings of 'coming again, or returning.' So this is how the psalm reads if we use those different English words:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures
and leads me beside still waters;
He revives my soul, and guides me
along the deep grooves of righteousness.
Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me;
you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over.
Only goodness and mercy shall come chasing after me
all the days of my life,
and I will keep returning to the house of the Lord for ever.

I think it helps to hear this psalm in a slightly different way so that it still has comfort for us but also some challenge – we don't get to stay in the places of rest for always, we need to keep journeying wherever the shepherd takes us. I enjoy the line 'only goodness and mercy shall come chasing after me all the days of my life.' That comes of following God along the deep grooves of righteousness.

And our epistle reading reminds us that the only way we know love is that Christ laid down his life for us and therefore we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Let us love in truth and action rather than in word or speech. By this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him. Again we are told that God provides everything we need; we receive from him everything we ask because we obey his commandments.

And this is his commandment that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another just as he commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him and he abides in us. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us: the same Spirit that empowered Peter and the other disciples to speak boldly about Christ to those who were interested or intrigued, but not committed. That is our task also. In the name of the risen Lord, Alleluia.

