

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 7, 2017
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10

For the most part at least, members of the Episcopal Church don't take the Bible literally. If we did, we could (so far as I'm concerned at least) hardly take it seriously.

The Bible itself makes the point extremely well. In the gospel of John alone, Jesus uses a variety of metaphors to describe himself:

I am the bread of life ... (John 6:35, 48)

I am the living bread that came down from heaven ... (John 6:51)

I am the light of the world ... (John 8:12; 9:5)

I am the gate ... (John 10:7, 9)

I am the good shepherd ... (John 10:11, 14)

I am the resurrection and the life ... (John 11:25)

I am the way, and the truth, and the life ... (John 14:6)

As John paints the image, there isn't a single way for Jesus to explain himself. So either he's going through a bit of an identity crisis or the mixing of metaphors is intended for effect, and something we should take seriously.

Some of these metaphors have captured our imaginations. Today is "Good Shepherd Sunday." It's a safe bet that, at least if popular opinion is the measure of a metaphor, "good shepherd" is one of the more successful metaphors Jesus ever used. But in this morning's gospel, Jesus also says, "I am the gate." At least on the face of it, it's not one of Jesus' better ideas. I know of no hymns or stained glass windows. But it's still worth our taking seriously.

The function of this gate is two-fold. It swings in two directions, swinging in to allow the sheep access to the sheepfold by night and swinging out to give them access to green pastures by day. Both points are points of emphasis for us to notice this morning.

As Jesus puts it, the gate keeps the sheep together and safe from thieves and bandits. That's its function, of course, but as Jesus paints the picture for us, the gate also shines a spotlight on who has a legitimate point of entry as against those who enter via another point of entry:

... anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

Those who are climbing over the wall, as it were, aren't concerned for the wellbeing of the sheep. The way they sneak in shows that they're just out to get "to" the sheep, trying to get "at" them. As Jesus goes on to say a bit later:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.

The Roman Catholic preacher and writer John Shea sums up the contrast this way:

Thieves are people who steal by craft and deceit; robbers are people who steal with violence. But both steal. They take things from people. They are rapacious, depriving people of whatever resources they have ... Thieves and robbers always leave people less than when they found them.

True shepherds are the opposite of thieves and robbers. They leave people more than when they found them.ⁱ

There's a backstory here. We started this morning without noticing what was going on before. In chapter 9, Jesus healed a man born blind. Jesus' own disciples assumed somebody must have done something to make him deserve it; either he must have sinned or his parents before him. Jesus rejected the premise, saying that he deserved their compassion. He gave him his sight.

Then the leaders interrogated the man after he had regained his sight, but they didn't like the answers he gave them, and they ultimately disapproved of him so strongly that they excommunicated him. But when Jesus learned that the man had been expelled from his own community, left to fend for himself, he sought him out and brought him into the community of his followers.

While some "leave people less than when they found them," shepherds "leave people more than when they found them." That's who Jesus is ... the gate that protects and preserves.

But the gate also swings open.

Now I will allow that it gets just a little muddied here. Jesus seems, so far as I can tell, to mix his metaphors. So anyhow, the gatekeeper opens the gate for the shepherd, who is clearly Jesus. And while I allow that there's a bit of coming in and going out again, the emphasis, on balance, is on how it is that the shepherd calls the sheep and leads them out; Jesus-the-shepherd comes to invite the sheep to go out and find green pasture.

I came that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.

Applying the metaphor, Jesus seems to be saying that he wants something more for his sheep, which of course is to say you and me, than for us to hole up and keep ourselves warm and dry, safe from the threats outside.

I was listening in on a podcast this past week. One of the presenters talked about what would happen if we were to ask a typical non-church-attending person: "What do you want out of the

church?" "Nothing" is all they would likely have to say. Church is not relevant. It doesn't matter to them. It's not part of their lifestyle, so they don't even think to ask the question. But what if we were to ask, "What do you want from life and what are your greatest concerns?" Jesus gives the answer to that question. ⁱⁱ

And it's clear that this "abundance" of life refers to something more than the "good things in life" as typically measured: observable opulence; assumed affluence; luxury or lavishness. He offers not just surviving, but thriving; not just getting by, but flourishing; not just existence, but joy. He's talking about a sense of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment, to know and be known.

When Jesus talks about abundance and green pastures, the conversation blurs into talk of "being saved." It pops up in this morning's gospel and in our first reading from Acts. The term carries some baggage for lots of folk, both inside and especially outside the church. We probably think of saving souls or getting someone to accept Jesus into their heart.

But in both Acts and in the gospel this morning, "being saved" seems to have a definition of its own. In Acts, "being *saved*" looks a lot like "being *served*" ... being loved and welcomed into a community.

And in this morning's gospel, "being saved" is used almost as an equivalent term for being led out of the sheepfold and into green pastures.

Especially on "Good Shepherd Sunday," it's hard NOT to hear echoes of the 23rd Psalm. Every year, on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, we hear an excerpt from the 10th chapter of John and we always read the whole of the 23rd Psalm. It's easily the best-known of all the psalms; and probably the most famous piece of poetry ever written. And yet I wonder if its very familiarity makes it hard for us to hear just how good the good news is.

I've lost track of where I first found it, but I once came upon a suggestion for how to help us hear something new in this old Psalm. It's called a "reverse Psalm." ⁱⁱⁱ The idea is to go through the Psalm and, verse by verse, reverse the meaning of the phrase. The result of the process is to paint a picture of life without abundance. I think of it as a counterintuitive way of encouraging us to seek this abundance offered to us a gift.

Well, I want to reverse the "reverse psalm" and go through it with you verse by verse this morning. I'll offer the opposite of abundant life, as it is described in the first verse of Psalm 23, and then you can respond with the actual promise from the Psalm, and we'll continue the pattern verse by reverse-verse to the end:

I have no one to lead me ... and my need is boundless.

*The LORD is my shepherd; *
I shall not be in want.*

I have no one to look out for me ... nothing cures the emptiness within me.

*He makes me lie down in green pastures *
and leads me beside still waters.*

I have no one to guide me ... and my soul is a wasteland.

*He revives my soul *
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.*

I am totally alone ... and no place is safe; I live constantly in fear.

*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.*

**I have no one to provide for me
... and the world is a cruel place with no one to trust.**

*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.*

I have no one to lead me ... and at the end is only sorrow.

*Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, *
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

ⁱ John Shea, in *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers, Year C: On Earth as It Is in Heaven* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2004), pp 177-178.

ⁱⁱ Pulpit Fiction podcast, "Episode 218" (for May 7, 2017), @ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/easter4a>.

ⁱⁱⁱ I had no luck finding the original, but I did find a link a variation on the idea (referred to here as an "antipsalm") when I did an internet search @ <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/justintaylor/2009/07/25/antipsalm-23-vs-psalm-23/>.