

THE REAL POWER OF RESURRECTION; JOHN 10:11-18; EASTER IV, APRIL 26, 2015; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The lesson from the Gospel of John today is typical of John's Jesus. He speaks metaphors and parables in an almost aloof and detached voice and describes the world and people in it as an epic battle between light and darkness.

This is not a reading we expect in Eastertide. Unlike the resurrection appearances of the last few weeks, Jesus the Good Shepherd doesn't evoke stones rolled away from empty tombs or frightened, awe-struck disciples.

The fact that John is the last of the Gospels to be written – almost a generation after Matthew, Mark and Luke – explains some of the distance we feel from the earthy, human Jesus who comes back in those gospels showing his wounds and eating broiled fish. John's Jesus is more ethereal which explains why the eagle is the symbol of this Gospel. But it turns out that the Good Shepherd of Chapter Ten is very much on point as an Easter text.

You see, by this time, John's community was under siege, far more so than the churches to which Matthew, Mark and Luke were writing. John's church was subject, like Jesus himself, to arrest, trial and execution by the authorities. So the image of the Good Shepherd – the one who stands by to protect his flock – would have resonated deeply with that persecuted Christian community.

Jesus' statement that he is the Good Shepherd, the commentators say, is a meditation on his death and resurrection; which makes it a fitting text for Eastertide but also speaks to Christians routinely subject to martyrdom.

The inspiration for the Good Shepherd Jesus depicts himself to be comes from the book of Ezekiel where the true shepherd is contrasted with faithless leaders who, like hired hands, run when the wolf comes, leaving the flock endangered. From Caiaphas to our Albany politicians under indictment faithless leaders plague every age.

In an essay entitled, "Our Duty to Praise," Bill Coyle comments on the poetry of P.J. Kavanagh, one of the finest poets writing in English today. His poetry explores the relationship between the living and the dead and between humans and nature.

The final stanza of his poem, "They Lift Their Heads" evokes the Good Shepherd: "When patient beasts lift up their heads from feeding,/We see in alerted eyes their identical question,/ 'Will he help me?' We recognize that expression/With greater fellow feeling than we know/And try to pat their heads. They flinch away,/Are left to endure the grip of night alone/(For who in his senses goes to join the sheep?);/We see them in the morning, frost-caked,/ Night-stunned, with no choice. They lift their/heads."

The image of those docile, patient sheep, lifting their heads, their alerted eyes, evokes, in this week past, the Jews of the Holocaust, the Armenians of Turkey's genocide in WWI and the ethnic cleansing of Rwanda – all three of which recently observed anniversaries.

Who in their senses goes to join the sheep? The Good Shepherd, of course. Jesus on the night of his arrest and eventual dying on a cross, lays his life down for the sheep; but then after his resurrection as his followers encountered his presence not in bizarre or surreal ways but in familiar, comforting and encouraging ways they too go to join the sheep, to stand by those who suffer, to call for justice.

The community that witnesses to his death and resurrection in every generation, the community known as the body of Christ in the world, joins the sheep in every age; far from perfect because the church at times knowingly fails to act; but consistently through the centuries it models itself after the Good Shepherd.

The real power of resurrection is the experience Jesus' followers have of the Good Shepherd, the risen Christ, who causes them to mimic his act of sacrifice for, and join cause with, those who are hungry, sick, imprisoned, and lonely and those persecuted for righteousness' sake.

Thus, Kavanagh says, it is our duty to praise – praise God for the Good Shepherd who stands by us in darkness; praise God who teaches us the ultimate value of human life; praise God for his image deep within us and by which we know and recognize truth; and praise God for the impulse to give ourselves away for others.

It is, I suspect, a sign of the spiritual poverty of our time that there seems to be so little praise evident in our living. Our society today, for those who do not inhabit what is a growing underclass, is extraordinarily self-centered. We exist in what many call and David Brooks recently referred to in a prophetic essay as, a culture of “meritocracy.” We make and earn our way by carefully coifed resumes and notches on our educational and professional belts that institutions of higher learning and employers are hungry for.

A sign of the wide appeal of this approach to life is found, says Brooks, in modern parenting which raises children by leading them through childhood in pursuit of the right academic choices, extra-curricular activities and list of achievements that will ensure entrance to the right colleges and ultimately lucrative, status-bestowing careers.

What children of meritocracy earn is parental affection and attention given for pursuing goals that give parents status and pleasure and validate their effectiveness as dads and moms. In other words, these children who are incessantly praised and carefully honed learn that love is conditional and life a performance.

Such children, says Brooks, uncertain of their parents' love, develop a voracious hunger for it. Conditional love is like an acid that dissolves the child's internal criteria to make her own decisions for her own life. Studies reveal that these children will excel in the short term as model students but come to resent their parents and feel adrift in life without a sense of selfhood.

But parenting by unconditional love, oblivious to achievement, sits outside the logic of the meritocracy. Unconditional love sits outside the self-centered, merit-based lives we are encouraged to live. The unsolicited impulse to praise sits outside the functional, merit-obsessed lives we pursue and train our children to emulate.

What I am saying is that the Christian life, the life of a church modeled on the Good Shepherd, the message of a God who reaches out to one and all, “other sheep that do not belong to this fold,” whom Jesus seeks to bring into the fold – this way and manner of living goes against the grain of the world in any century, first or twenty-first.

The great danger in a society like ours that is relatively safe, in which we enjoy freedoms and protection from tyranny, is that it is easy to become assimilated into the reigning cultural norms and values.

And here the Good Shepherd metaphor is perhaps most powerful and compelling for the antidote to assimilation is the intimate relationship that binds together shepherd and sheep. This is a relationship (Jesus and us) that Jesus says is rooted in the relationship between the Father and Son because, he says, the Father and I are one; and it means too there are no strangers in the flock; for all are known, all are welcome.

But more than recognition of the shepherd by the sheep, there is a deep involvement in one another’s lives, a self-giving, evidenced in the crucifixion. It is an interesting picture to juxtapose with many modern communities where neighbors scarcely know the names of those living next door, and where many in fact seek anonymity.

Such mutual knowing and intimacy could be seen as (and in some churches is) a form of exclusivism, a kind of coziness that has turned inward, not unlike gated communities that gather those who look, act, think and vote alike and then purport ingenuously to love their neighbor as themselves.

The intimacy of the community of the Good Shepherd, however, is of a different kind; it is based on Jesus’ reminder that there are “other sheep that do not belong to this fold.” Who are they? They are the outcast and downtrodden, those left out of a society that celebrates material success, idolizes youth, and flaunts skin-deep beauty. They are the African immigrants fleeing to Europe in lethally loaded ferries, they are young men of color suspect and scrutinized, often with excessive force by police. They are the women of India subject to abuse and profiteering. They are ex-offenders in this community seeking to productively re-enter society.

We face a choice each week: will we be the community of the Good Shepherd that goes against the grain of the reigning culture, that reaches out to those cast off by a meritocratic culture or will we merely reflect the society at large?

One of the blessings of our music ministry is hearing voices of children and adults, like we hear today, lifted up with instrument and organ and that remind us it is not only our duty but our joy to praise the God of life.

I know that through the torrent of days I need those reminders. Not one of us here is without reason to give praise for the God who stands by and over us like a Good Shepherd. I remember my crash in 2013 in an Adirondack MTB race; the bike hit a rock at high speed and did a complete end over end that threw me off the road deep into a wooded ravine. How I came away with only minor cuts is inexplicable but for the Good Shepherd watching over me, reminding me of the gift of life.

Or maybe it was something that nudged you to reach out rather than pull back, to share rather than to conserve; maybe it was that inner calm when you got the bad news or the new path that opened up in a contentious relationship. We are like the person who asked why if God promises to be with us in our trials and tribulations are there only one set of footprints at the lowest times of our life and the answer comes, "It was then that I carried you." We are the lone lost sheep the shepherd comes to find and carries home on his shoulders.

If we were to disappear from the face of the earth tomorrow what signs would we leave that we lived our lives with gratitude and with a deep sense of the rightness and duty we have, not to mention the joy, as people of God to praise the Creator; people who have been rescued from the jaws of ruin and death more times than we care to acknowledge? It is a question worth pondering.

And it is a question the quality, if not the outcome of our lives depends upon us answering. How? By living with the unconditional grace we are given each and every day that upholds and strengthens us. Such living resides outside the logic and realm of the meritocracy but dwells very much at the heart of the kingdom of God. Amen.