

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
April 30, 2023 – 4 Easter  
Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 2:19-25; Psalm 23; John 10:1-10  
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This morning I would like to comment briefly on all our scripture readings, not that I find a clear connection among them, but that each merits a word for faithful people.

First, the lesson from the Acts of the Apostles, the New Testament record of the first followers of Jesus after his death and resurrection. The first sentence will sound familiar to regular churchgoers. “Those who had been baptized devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” When we renew our baptismal vows, we make a promise: “Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?” (BCP, page 293)

“The apostles’ teaching” – this is a promise to remain true to the witness of the first followers of Jesus, to their testimony regarding what Jesus taught and what he did, his death and resurrection, and his resurrection appearances. This is very important, especially at this distance in time from Jesus’ years on earth. In my mind, this is why we emphasize our readings from the Gospels – remember, remember, remember that this is the Lord we seek to follow.

We also promise to continue in the “apostles’ fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.” We promise to gather together in Christ’s name to break the bread of the Eucharist and to pray in his name. For most of us today, this means that we promise to attend church regularly, because it is on Sunday mornings that we most consistently come together in the name of the Lord.

Our lesson tells us that the first church members were able to do “wonders and signs.” Before his death, Jesus had told the disciples that they would, that they would be able to do even greater things than he had done. There are groups of Christians who think that this ability was only available to the very first followers of Jesus. In our denomination we think that God may continue to do “wonders and signs” through the followers of Jesus. This belief is clearest regarding the ministry of healing. We believe that through prayer and anointing with oil God may indeed heal people, in body, mind, or spirit.

Our lesson ends, “day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” What was drawing new converts to the faith? They were attracted by the wonders and signs the early church members did, by their worship and teaching that carried over to the home, and by their radical sharing of worldly goods. This may be something to think about when we consider the issue of church growth now.

Today’s passage from The First Letter of Peter addresses the issue of suffering, specifically suffering for being a Christian in a time of persecution. The context is important. Bible passages like this one have been misused, suggesting that people who suffer at the hands of others – servants or slaves, women, children – should suffer in silence, without seeking justice for themselves or an end to their suffering. This is a very convenient teaching for those who hold and abuse power.

But this is not what scripture teaches. I have often made the point that near the end of his life Jesus chose to go to Jerusalem, where he would be betrayed, suffer, and die. He was not a powerless victim without resources. As he said to one of his disciples when he was arrested, "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, that say it must happen in this way?" (Matthew 26:53-54)

It is unlikely that you or I will be persecuted for our faith. We will not be called upon to bravely choose and face suffering and death for Christ. But we know that human life does not come without pain. We are physical beings, and we suffer physical pain. We are emotional beings, and we suffer emotional pain. To love others means to sympathize with their suffering, to feel grief at their loss. Suffering will come, and then we must choose how to bear it. Will we lash out in our pain and cause pain for others? Or will we act as members of the household of God and, as much as we can, transform our own pain into compassion – to understanding and alleviating the suffering of those around us?

"The Lord is my shepherd." Of today's scripture readings the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is the most ancient, written sometime between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E. The psalmist describes God as a shepherd who leads the sheep to pasture, to waters that are not turbulent but still – and therefore easy to drink from – and through difficult terrain. In a courageous statement of faith, the psalmist declares, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me."

Nearly a thousand years later the author of the Gospel of John uses the metaphor of shepherd and sheep to describe Jesus and his relationship with us. In the verse following this morning's reading Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Jesus uses the ancient metaphor from scripture, applies it to himself, and takes it further. The good shepherd does more than guide and comfort his sheep. He is in relationship with his sheep. "He calls his own sheep by name." And when the sheep are in danger, the good shepherd willingly lays down his life for the sheep. This is the measure of God's love for us. This love is the source of the abundant life promised by Jesus to those who follow him.

Take a moment to think of your life, in terms of being one of Jesus' sheep. How has Jesus called you by name to lead you? How is Jesus calling you now? Are you listening for his voice? In the words of a hymn by that name, "Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me." Not shouting, but calling softly. If we fill our lives with too much noise of all kinds, we may miss hearing Jesus when he calls us by name. What might we do to listen for his loving voice? His voice will lead us to safety, to true life.

As we follow Jesus we may be strengthened beyond measure by the knowledge that Jesus is our Good Shepherd, the one who was willing to lay down his life for his sheep, the one who shows us God's limitless love for us. In Easter season, when we focus on Christ's resurrection, we affirm our faith that God's love and life and goodness are stronger than all the forces of death and evil. We declare that our shepherd is "the King of love." And we pray with the psalmist, "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." Amen.