

Title: Hearing the Voice of Our Shepherd
Date: 5/8/2022 (Easter 4, Year C)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [Acts 9:36-43](#); [Revelation 7:9-17](#); [John 10:22-30](#); [Psalm 23](#)
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/b2fY-BzmEUA?t=1232>

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 (Psalm 23:4).
Amen.

A month into my time here, one of the things I'm still getting used to is the rhythm of preaching every Sunday. It is not easy, and at the same time it feels like such a gift.

It is a gift because I'm learning to look at each Sunday's readings in the context of the readings around it. Preaching every Sunday this Easter has allowed me to track the narrative arc of this season of the church year in a way that I haven't in the past.

For the first time, it hit me that even though the calendar of readings is set up as a three-year cycle, the collect of the day is always the same. This means that even though we are always pointed toward the same themes, we never experience these themes the same way each time they come up.

We don't experience them differently just because the readings are different. We experience them differently each time because we have changed, our lives have changed, and the world around us has changed. Preparing to preach has been like following a TV show I can't binge watch; every week I'm eager to see what the new episode brings, even if I'm the person who has to write it.

To recap this season of sermons, on the first Sunday of Easter, the resurrection is proclaimed. The second Sunday of Easter, through the story of Thomas we wrestle with our doubts about the resurrection and with the relationship between doubt and faith. On the third Sunday of Easter, the resurrection of Jesus is made more present and real through the breaking of bread and the sharing of fish. On the fourth Sunday of Easter, the focus turns from the resurrection to our response to the resurrection.

This is similar to the way our baptismal covenant is structured. After we proclaim what we believe about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit, we are asked five questions. Among them are: Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? (BCP 304-305)

These questions remind us that what we believe has to have a real and tangible implication on how we live our lives and how we treat one another. We won't always get it right, but with God's help we will learn, and we will try.

This Sunday is also known as Good Shepherd Sunday because we always read Psalm 23 and, instead of a resurrection account, we get Jesus comparing himself to a shepherd.

In the gospel according to John, Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand” (Jn 10:27-28).

Here, a helpful question to ask is,

“How do we know we are hearing Jesus’ voice?”

The Bible has been used to unite people, and the Bible has been used to divide people. Christians have used the Bible to justify the enslavement of African Americans, and to justify the abolition of slavery. Christians have used the Bible to oppose women’s access to abortion and birth control, and to support women’s access to abortion and birth control. Christians have used the Bible to block LGBTQ+ people from accessing sacramental rites (r-i-t-e-s) such as marriage and ordination, and to affirm their access to those same sacramental rites. Likewise, there are divisions among the followers of Jesus when it comes to the question of how we are called to respond to climate change, to the growing disparity between rich and poor, to the way history is being taught in our schools.

Among all these voices claiming authority based on the Bible, how can we be confident that we are listening to the voice of our shepherd?

In the Episcopal Church, for the teachings to have authority, for us to know the teachings aren’t coming from our own ego or personal agendas, we measure it against something called the three-legged stool. This is a tool that helps us stay on firm theological footing, pun intended, as we look at what is happening in the world and figure out how we are called to respond as Christians.

The three legs of this stool are Scripture, Tradition, and Reason.

The first leg is Scripture. The word of God wasn’t written in a vacuum and it was neither read nor interpreted in a vacuum. The Old Testament is the story of the relationship between God and God’s people, as understood by the people when they lived in tribes and in kingdoms, as slaves and as exiles. Those teachings were then interpreted by Jesus to a colonized people living under Roman occupation and as a corrective to the way those teachings were understood and being practiced at that time. Now, we are transposing them to life in 21st Century Austin.

As we read scripture, it’s important to think about who we identify with, whose voices are being highlighted, and whose voices are missing. For example, in today’s reading from Acts, we have the story of Tabitha, also called Dorcas. Though she was not by any means the only woman who was a disciple of Jesus, this is the only story where the feminine form of the Greek word for disciple is used.¹ How would our reading of the Bible be different if we begin to look for and center the voices of the women and others whose stories are often pushed to the side?

The second leg is tradition. Tradition refers to the church’s ongoing experience with the presence and activity of God; this has been passed down to us, generation after

generation.² The framework of the three-legged stool is itself part of our tradition. It was developed by Anglican theologian Richard Hooker in the 16th century.

Tradition tells us, “This is the way we’ve always done it,” and tradition ALSO tells us, “This is the way we used to do it, then we realized we got it wrong, so now we do things another way.” Tradition reminds us to be faithful, and it reminds us that sometimes being faithful looks like being willing to change our minds, as The Episcopal Church has around the issues of slavery, the ordination of women, and marriage. Those changes don’t automatically happen when there are cultural changes; they are grounded in our ongoing study of Scripture.

The third leg is reason, which “includes the human capacity to discern the truth in both rational and intuitive ways.”³ Early theologians believed being created in the likeness of God is what gives us our powers of reasoning. We are born with it, and it matures through experience and training. Reason is not limited to logic, and it includes the experiences that have shaped our beliefs and behaviors. So, it is important to be aware of how those experiences can enhance or limit the way we read scripture and the way we interact with our tradition.

Balancing these three legs can feel like a mental exercise, so it is important to remind ourselves of the words of our presiding bishop, Michael Curry. Bishop Curry tells us that the Way of Jesus is (wait for it) loving, liberating, and lifegiving.⁴ This has three implications.

First, walking the Way of Jesus looks like practicing our faith in a way that is loving, liberating, and lifegiving for us.

The sheep following the shepherd did not have to earn the right to eternal life. They did not have to compile a list of good deeds that proved they deserved to be loved and cared for in this life. Recognizing this can go a long way toward helping us to feel like the sheep in Psalm 23, to feel that we are not in want, that our souls are revived, that we are lying beside still waters, no matter what is happening around us.

Second, walking the Way of Jesus looks like practicing our faith in a way that is loving, liberating, and lifegiving for those who are impacted by all these interpretations. Their physical, mental and emotional well-being are impacted by the things people do after reading the Bible. This is a matter of life and death, hope and despair. Loving those who are impacted can look like offering them any kind of support we can, speaking up against the ways in which they are seen as and being treated as less human, less deserving, less a child of God. It is important to do this in the public square, and it might be even more important to do this in private settings.

Third, when we speak up for our siblings in Christ as we walk the Way of Jesus, it is important to practice our faith in a way that is loving, liberating, and lifegiving for the people whose reading of the Bible have led them in a different direction than the one we’re on.

This can be really hard, especially when it feels like they are questioning our or our siblings' fundamental identity as a beloved child of God and full member of the body of Christ. This can be really hard, when it seems like we are always asked to be patient and wait for change. This is where the reminder to be loving, liberating and lifegiving toward ourselves comes in. Not everyone is called to do this work all the time, or to the same degree.

Those who feel called to this work must remember that this is not so much a matter of convincing and or of giving people more information. It begins with listening and understanding.

Just as our Sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, the news headlines that cause pain and division are outward and visible signs of an inward spiritual brokenness. They reflect a deeper wound, a deeper fear, a deeper despair.

These are symptoms of a more fundamental division and separation between us and our shepherd. For the movement toward love, liberation and life to take root, this is where healing needs to take place. This is where we need to reconnect what has been torn apart.

How do we know we are hearing the voice of our shepherd?

When none of us are in want.

When all of us find ourselves in green pastures and by still waters, not because we are in a special space set apart from this world, or because we are no longer in this world, but because this world is becoming more and more like the Kingdom of Heaven.

Amen.

¹ Harvard, J. S. (2009). [Pastoral Perspective on Acts 9:36–43](#). In D. L. Bartlett & B. B. Taylor (Eds.), *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C* (Vol. 2, p. 428). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

² <https://episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/authority-sources-anglicanism>

³ <https://episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/authority-sources-anglicanism>

⁴ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/way-of-love/>