

Bible Study
Fourth Sunday after Easter, Year A
May 7, 2017

[RCL] Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

Acts 2:42-47

During the Easter season, lections from the book of Acts are used in place of the Old Testament because they record the early response of the church to Christ's resurrection. In its larger context, the assigned text for Easter 4A serves as a transition from Peter's first sermon (2:14-36, 38-40, cf. Easter 3A) to his second sermon (3:12-26, cf. Thursday in Easter Week). This passage describes what happened in response to Peter's first sermon. In verse 42, we see four characteristics of the community life of the church, i.e. devotion to (1) the apostles' teaching, (2) fellowship, (3) the breaking of bread, and (4) the prayers.

The word in Greek for "fellowship" is *koinonia*, which means a shared and common life. We see characteristics of this common life by "all who believed" in the rest of the passage, in that they were together, had all things in common, spent much time together, and so forth (vv.44-46). It is possible that "the breaking of bread" is a double entendre, that is, it could refer to both the Eucharist and to common meals. Regarding the former, we are reminded of what happened in Luke 24, where the eyes of the followers were not opened until Jesus had "broken the bread" (vv.31, 35). Regarding the latter, we see them "[breaking] bread at home" and eating their food with "glad and generous hearts..." (v.46).

- What do you think contributed to the growth of the early church (v.47b)? Was it simply because of the "signs and wonders" (v.43)? Do you think it had anything to do with the four characteristics of this early community? Yes or No? Why or why not?
- Look at each of the four characteristics in verse 42 and how they were manifested in the life of the believers. Compare this with your own faith community. What is similar? What is different? Are these applicable to life today? Why or why not? If something does not seem applicable, then consider how the principle behind it may be implemented. Is there anything that you think is missing?

Psalm 23

What more can be said about this Song of Trust, which is read each Easter 4 and on other days of the church year? The simple yet profound metaphor of "the shepherd," and his relationship to his sheep is often viewed as unifying the entire psalm. According to this perspective, the whole psalm is an exposition of the first verse, where we see a typical near-eastern shepherd fulfilling his duties: ensuring that the sheep have water, food, rest, and safe paths to walk on, protecting them from dangers, particularly predators that would attack and kill them, using his staff and rod to not only protect the sheep, but to herd them, and putting oil on their heads and noses to drive away the annoying insects that cause infection. The themes of guidance, provision, and refuge are predominant. When Christians read this psalm, they see Jesus as the Good Shepherd (cf. John 10) who restores our souls, leads us in right

paths, accompanies and comforts us through danger and darkness, provides the Eucharistic meal in the presence of our enemies of sin and death, and actively pursues us every day we live.

- An interesting observation is the shift in pronouns referring to the LORD (the 3rd person “he” in vv.1-3, but 2nd person “you” vv.4-6). What is happening in the text when the author shifts from 3rd person to this direct address?
- In verse 6, the word “follow” does not imply “bringing up the rear,” but rather the sense is that of “pursuing.” The covenantal steadfast goodness and mercy, or love and support, of the Lord are not simply things upon which we depend each and every day, but rather these are things that vigorously *pursue* us. What difference does this make to you?
- There are four sets of contrasts in this psalm: (1) want and provision, (2) rest and activity, (3) fear and comfort, and (4) danger and security. Go back through the psalm and look at each of these. What do they reveal about the Lord and humanity? How do these apply to your life? What effect does this have on your perspective about your present and future?

I Peter 2:19-25

The idea of suffering for doing good is a theme in 1 Peter. We see this illustrated in the proverbial quality of the first two verses in this lection, where a contrast is highlighted between enduring pain and suffering for doing wrong, versus for doing right. For the former, there is no credit due. For the latter, however, there is not only “credit to you” for suffering unjustly, but moreover, “God’s approval” of you. Lest the reader be surprised by this, the writer points to Christ’s suffering on our behalf, drawing from the image of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53, where we see Jesus, the one without sin, choose to suffer without protest, because he trusted God for his vindication (vv. 22-23). The author suggests Christ’s suffering is not only an example for us to follow (vv. 21), but it is also redemptive (v. 24). Christ’s passion, his atoning sacrifice for our sins, restores our relationship with “the shepherd and guardian of [our] souls” (v. 25). Jesus is not only the Good Shepherd who gives his life for his sheep, but he is also the one who protects, provides for, and leads his sheep (cf. John 10, Psalm 23).

- What are some examples of suffering unjustly? Recall a time when you, or someone you know, has experienced unjust suffering. How did you feel? How did you respond? What have you learned about Jesus’ understanding of this experience? Are there situations where we should not follow Christ’s examples of non-retaliation?
- Why was Jesus willing to submit to death? To whom did he trust for his ultimate vindication? In what ways might this encourage you, when you face the pain and suffering of misunderstanding, marginalization, persecution, etc. for “doing the right thing” for His name’s sake?

John 10:1-10

This lection contains two instances of reported direct speech (vv.1-5 and vv.7-10), both of which contain two images to describe Jesus’ relationship to his followers: a shepherd and a gate.

In the first section (vv.1-5), we hear Jesus use a shepherding metaphor to describe legitimate and rightful leadership. We note a contrast between how the sheepfold is accessed, and how the sheep respond to the voice they hear. Those who seek to access the sheepfold in a stealthy manner are deemed to be thieves and bandits. In contrast, the rightful shepherd uses the gate, which is opened by the gatekeeper (1-3a). When the sheep hear the voice of a stranger, they will run away because they do not recognize the voice. In contrast, when the sheep hear the voice of the rightful shepherd, they follow because they know his voice (3b-5).

- What does it mean to “know his voice?” What kinds of things can we do to cultivate an ability to hear and recognize his voice?

Before leaving this section, the two observations are worth noting about the nature of his leadership: the shepherd not only “calls his own sheep *by name*,” but he also “goes *ahead of them*” once he has led them out.

- What difference does it make that Jesus intimately knows each of us by name, and that he does not abandon us, but rather goes ahead of us?

At the close of this section, we get a comment from the narrator in verse 6. Since Jesus’ audience did not understand his “figure of speech” (vv.1-5), it becomes necessary for him to offer a different way to describe his relationship to his followers. In this second section (vv.7-10), Jesus uses the “gate” image again, thereby connecting it with the first section, where its function was to identify who the rightful and legitimate shepherd was, that is, the gate was the only point of authorized entry into the sheepfold.

While there are many interesting observations to make here, it’s important to note the use of this image in connection with the declaration “I am,” which harkens back to Ex 3:14, Isa.45:5a; 48.12b, and used in the Gospel of John six other times (I am “the bread of life,” “the light of the world,” “the good shepherd,” “the resurrection and the life,” “the way, and the truth, and the life,” and, “the true vine”).

- Why do you think Jesus uses the “I am” declaration here? He could have said, “I am *like* a gate...” or “I am *like* a shepherd...” (cf. John 10:11)? What is the significance of this? What do these various images and metaphors teach us about Jesus’ salvific relationship to the world?

Diane C. Mumma-Wakabayashi is a Candidate for Holy Orders. She and her husband Allen (also a Candidate) are currently at Nashotah House Theological Seminary. They are finishing up a year of Anglican Studies coursework in preparation for ordination this year. They have three lovely Pembroke Welsh Corgis - Josephus, Buckaroo, and Cooper.

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