

Thankful Memorial, Chattanooga
May 8, 2022
Year C, Easter 4: Good Shepherd Sunday
The Choice to Belong
The Rev. Leyla King

Acts 9:36-43
Psalm 23
Revelation 7:9-17
John 10:22-30

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In addition to being Mother's Day, today is Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year, on the fourth Sunday of Easter, our lectionary texts invite us to imagine Jesus as a good shepherd and us as his sheep. We always read and hear together Psalm 23 and some portion of the tenth chapter of John's gospel along with other texts from the New Testament that help create this bucolic image of our Lord.

But, as beautiful as these texts are, I think this year especially, we can't help but feel a kind of tension here. At the same time that the lessons from the scriptures resonate with and reassure us, they also uncover a raw yearning in our souls, the recognition that the promises of our faith still seem so far from becoming a reality.

Take Tabitha, for instance. In the story from Acts the disciple in Joppa who "was devoted to good works and acts of charity," who has cared so well for the most vulnerable in her community dies. And quickly Peter comes to Joppa and with three words raises Tabitha from the dead. It's a lovely story that tells us about God's power acting through human hands – both Peter's *and* Tabitha's – to restore us to life in the face of hardship and even death.

But I hear that story having just a few days ago visited Bill Webster on his death bed, saying the prayers appropriate for that holy transition through my own tears. Here was a Thankful One who, like Tabitha, has cared for his community so well in this life. But when Bill's time finally came yesterday morning, there was no Peter popping around to raise him from the dead and to turn our weeping to joyful wonder.

Or take the verses from Revelation, the glorious promise that those who worship the Lamb for all eternity "will hunger no more, and thirst no more... and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." How we long for that paradise of God's creation in this moment in time rife with war and poverty, injustice and global anxiety. It seems almost cruel to have such a picture of paradise brought to life before our eyes that see so much hunger and thirst and suffering around us right now. The writer addressed his Revelation to an early Christian community oppressed by the Roman Empire. We, like them, see and feel that oppression and long for it to end.

When the thorny path we find ourselves in is anything but green and the agitated waters threaten to overwhelm and drown us, how can we pray the words of Psalm 23 without a sense of desperation? If the Lord is my shepherd, why do I so often feel what I lack, what I long for, what I *want*?

In the face of these texts, we cry out, "If you are the Good Shepherd, show us!" And our cry is echoed by the voices in John's gospel: "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

And at first, Jesus' answer to our cry seems anything but plain. "I have told you, and you do not believe," he says. And he goes on: "you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep."

Now, I don't know about you, but Jesus' response causes me *more* anxiety, not less, and raises more questions than it answers. Do *I* belong to Jesus' sheep? If so, how do I know? If not, how do I get there? What can I do, how can I make myself worthy? Tell me what to say, what to believe so that I can be assured of my own belonging?

But such anxiety is the result of a tragically common misreading of Jesus' words. How often have we heard or been told some version of this misunderstanding: "Believe in Jesus Christ as the Lord and you will be saved; believe in Jesus and you will belong." But that's the exact *opposite* of what Jesus says here in John's gospel. He doesn't say "If you believe in me, you will belong to me." He says: "If you belong to me, you will believe in me."

The choice Jesus presents to his hearers, the choice he presents to us, is not about whether or not we *believe* but whether or not we want to *belong*. The invitation of this Good Shepherd Sunday is to decide whether or not to take Jesus up on his always-standing offer: Do we choose to be part of his flock? To listen for his voice and follow where it leads us – whether the paths be straight or crooked, thorny or green, bathed in light or darkened by the shadow of death? Jesus' offer is not a demand for our blind belief but an invitation into radical trust in the One that promises to be present to and with us come what may.

But make no mistake, this is no promise of blue skies and rainbows all the time. The choice to belong to the Shepherd's fold does not allow us to avoid "the great ordeal" of life, the hardships of this broken world.

But here's what our belonging does provide:

When we see the suffering of those around us, we know that it is not the Lord's will. When we weep over the loss of the ones we love, we know that they are not gone from us forever. When we are anxious about the uncertainties that loom on the horizon, we know that the Lord is with us. When the world leaves us wanting for justice or joy, access or acknowledgement, we know that we will never want for God's love. When we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we know that our way through is certain and our strength lies in the One who leads us on.

Is such knowledge enough? Is the belief that comes with our belonging to Jesus adequate to meet the challenges of the "great ordeal" of our life? *That*, ultimately, is the choice put before us this Good Shepherd Sunday and the hope of our faith now and always:

"O God whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads." Amen.