

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
Revised Common Lectionary, Year C

April 29th, 2007

Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Believing in the Good Shepherd
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, Rector

Preaching about the Good Shepherd has always been an awkward task for me. Putting into preachy words the comforting texts that warm hearts the world over, bring comfort in times of grief and trouble, and to speak with some authority and eloquence to the deep places of the human soul might be too much to expect perhaps.

Another reason is that I always feel that I am preaching to the choir. The presence of the Good Shepherd is to speak of the God we know already, even in our bones, even in the face of our doubts and questions – a God whose voice we recognize in all the mysterious and wonderful ways our lives are touched, moved, transformed, and shepherded by Christ.

When I read the comforting passages of today, I'm reminded myself always of the warmth of sitting at home with the colors of evening shining through the windows of the family room, with the rich sounds of music my parents would put on the record player or the old 8-Track stereo system. Of feeling opened to the universe like a flower, but unafraid and in wonder. And calling what that wonder pointed to, "God" and "Holy."

Most of us know, in one way or another, the voice of the Good Shepherd in our lives. It is often too profound for words, too visceral to fit neatly into oral or written description, and often too intimate to share easily.

Most of us are here this morning one way or another because we've encountered the voice of the Good Shepherd speaking to us. Many of us show up because we are seeking, if truth be told, to either recover or build anew the feelings of that encounter. On any given Sunday, and indeed any given day, some of us will succeed. Some of us will be disappointed. Some of us will be indifferent or unsure. But gathering as we do as a people of faith means rekindling that spiritual sense that we are being closely held, guided, and transformed by Someone who knows us more intimately than we know ourselves.

But beware. There are trappings all around that might get in the way. Because we are a religious people, as well. And as such, we can risk getting caught up in things that may not lead us where we wish to go. . .or need to go.

Jesus, we hear in John's Gospel today, is walking where any good first-century Messiah should be walking, in the Portico of Solomon, the part of the Temple honoring the greatest king of Israel. And, in today's reading, it is the Feast of the Dedication, *Hanukah*, commemorating the rebellion

of the Maccabees a few centuries before, who had liberated Israel from a repressive occupying power.

In brief, any knowledgeable Jew of the first century would see that all of the signs were ripe for Jesus to launch a similar rebellion against the Romans, now occupying Israel and to whom the Temple authorities were beholden. The Judeans who approach Jesus are certainly not foolish. They recognize the perfect storm of commemoration, location, and shared history, and Jesus' large following. And so they ask the obvious question about whether or not Jesus is the Messiah, and expect a "plain" answer.

A plain answer: as though plain, bald, direct claims by Jesus about himself would somehow either settle the argument one way or the other. It certainly would have empowered the religious or Roman authorities – most likely to cast Jesus as a wanton rebel.

But, in his usual style, rather than answering directly, Jesus appeals to the witness of his followers, and the powerful and ancient image of the Good Shepherd with all of its potency. Being a political messiah would mean fitting neatly into an already well-weathered narrative. Instead, Jesus appeals to something utterly relational and makes claims on a radical union with God.

The religious authorities are annoyed because Jesus refuses to be pigeon-holed by their notions of what a Messiah should be. They are also irritated by his constant appeals to a radical relationship with ordinary people and the Creator that seems to have life and viability beyond the tightly constricted religious and social practices sustaining the structures of power and control. If we were to continue to read this passage from John's Gospel, we would find that almost immediately in response, the religious authorities prepare to stone Jesus for uttering blasphemy. The rootstock of violence, as many of us know, is often built upon fear, sometimes fear that wishes to hang on to the security of our own rectitude, the value of our own ideas and expectations. But the rootstock of violence is therefore often found in illusion – like the illusions that our most closely held propositions are somehow correct for all time and universal or immutable and divine, or somehow are key to our identity.

To know and to be known by the Risen Christ is to see so much more deeply than believing in a string of propositions, or, quite frankly, in being "religious" in the ordinary sense. Religious folk, as we all know, can just as easily be co-opted by power, control, and constricted views of others and the world as anyone. Jesus was not calling forth his sheep to merely found a new religious tradition or make his own list of beliefs to be disseminated through his followers. He was out for something much deeper, and it is that depth that our readings about the Good Shepherd and the raising up of Tabitha in Acts speak of today.

As Christians, we are called to believe, to put our faith in, our stock of hope, our greatest love, to direct our doubts, fears, and questions to the Risen Christ and the God with whom Jesus claims union.

Christianity has suffered over many generations its own reductionist sets of immutable beliefs: doctrines often born on the horns of dilemmas and controversies that most of us have forgotten.

Of course doctrine does have its place in our midst. But its place is *less* than primary, for we are not called to worship doctrine, proposition, or mere belief in the contemporary sense of the world. We do not worship putting stock in given historic statements. Our beliefs by themselves simply do not carry enough on their own, if for no other reason, because they are *our* beliefs – built up around our invariably limited worldviews, born largely on our own, often accidental, location in the universe, with all of the heritage and history that brings with it. Again, that is not to say our beliefs have no merit. But they are a poor copy of what we should hold most dear. And, when our beliefs are at their best, they can only point to the One who holds us dearer than we could ever hold ourselves.

In a moment we utter the Nicene Creed that opens with “We believe in One God.” It is not so much that we assent to a string of doctrine, but rather that we believe in this God, this Good Shepherd, this marvelous Creator who knows our voices before we know them, this Savior who can pick you, me, and any one of us out when we are lost – be it alone or in a crowd – who knows us better than our mothers or fathers know us, more deeply than a friend or lover.

Jesus makes claims far and beyond that of the sort a sensible first-century Messiah would have made. Throwing out the Romans should have been top of the list, but Jesus instead is after drawing people into an extraordinary relationship with their God. Not a relationship where authorities or rules or narrow frameworks of belief in particular ideas stand as proxy for the Real Thing. But an intimate relationship like a shepherd to sheep – where the voice, character, even the peculiar smell, taste, and feeling of God in Christ is immediately available.

It’s to this relationship that we are called through the bread and the wine and the uttering of ancient articles of faith and the sharing of common story in our hallowed Scriptures. Most days will be quietly fighting with each other or within ourselves about what we really “believe.” But if we look deeper than that, we will see that it is the Good Shepherd who matters more. And believing *in* that Good Shepherd and listening hard for the voice of the One who made us and saves us is our primary adventure in Life. For when we hear, our hearts will be turned, and we won’t be able to help but follow, and then to invite others to join us in the Way.