

Easter 4C
Readings: Acts 9:36-43

The Rev. Dr. Darcy Williams @ Emmanuel, Chestertown
Psalm 23 Rev 7:9-17

8 May 2022
John 10:22-30

As we continue our journey through the Easter season, we are greeted with the familiar image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, an equally familiar psalm and passage from Revelation. Then we have another chapter in Acts, following the apostles as they find their prophetic and missional voices in the days, weeks and months following Jesus' death and Resurrection. Each week we witness another scene from the early days of the church. With each one we have the opportunity to witness Jesus' followers grow in the own faith as they spread the gospel message of unconditional welcome and love.

Last week, Bishop San shared his insights into the conversions of Paul on the road to Damascus and Peter on the beach when the risen Christ asked pointedly, "Simon Peter, do you love me?" Both Paul and Peter were offered a choice – to continue their lives as they were – Paul as a persecutor of the followers of Jesus and Peter a justly frightened disciple who witnessed what following Jesus might mean – or would each hear Jesus' invitation to follow him and choose to step out in faith spreading the Good News of God's redemptive grace? As we know, both Paul and Peter heard God's call and empowered by the Holy Spirit became two of the most ardent leaders of the early church.

The call they heard was the voice of the Good Shepherd, Jesus, Son of God, the risen Christ. For Paul it was a voice coming from the midst of blinding light, a voice so sure and trustworthy that Paul could do nothing but listen and believe. For Peter, it was the voice of his friend and teacher filled with love, forgiveness and understanding.

That is the same voice we hear today in the gospel when the Jews in the temple ask Jesus to tell them plainly if her is the Messiah. It is the voice of one who speaks with leadership and compassion, with integrity and understanding, with authority and love.

But this week, there is a slight twist which challenges us to sit up and look a little more closely and a little more critically at what the gospel is telling us.

The scene opens in Jerusalem around the time of the feast of Dedication. This is the Jewish feast that commemorates the rededication of the temple by the Maccabees in 164 BCE, after having been desecrated by years of Greek occupation especially under King Antiochus IV, who tried to destroy Judaism by forcing the Jews to adopt the ways and cultural norms of Greece and to offer sacrifices to the Greek gods. The final insult was to place a statue of Zeus in the temple sanctuary and to contaminate all but one vial of blessed holy oil. The feast of Dedication is better known today by its Hebrew name Hanukkah.¹

We find Jesus walking with his disciples under the portico of Solomon, one of the remnants of the original temple built by Solomon. His presence in that particular location links Jesus physically in the line of descendants of David. Being in Jerusalem at the time of this festival connects him directly to the sanctity of the temple, his Father's house.

The Pharisees and others choose this moment as an opportune time to question Jesus again. We don't know if they are asking because they truly want to know, or are looking to trick him into a proclamation that could get him killed by the Roman authorities. In their minds, the Messiah will take on the mantle of the great warrior king David and save them from Roman oppression. Asking the question in a public place brings its own share of risks. The wrong ears hearing the question could bring as much trouble for the Pharisees as it could for Jesus.

Jesus' answer confounds them. *"I have told you, and you do not believe."* Author Nancy Rockwell writes "He knows they mean mighty doings, Messiah-deeds of power and might. But he answers only about being, being beloved. About enfolding those who love him in the pure light and life of belovedness. About those who love him being beyond confusion about who he is. About his complete unity with God."ⁱⁱ

Linking himself with shepherds throughout Biblical history: with Abel, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David, Jesus continues to frame his answer in terms of the relationship he has with his followers, his flock.

Sheep are notoriously independent and somewhat stubborn. They recognize the shepherd by voice and by appearance, although they do not always respond. Shepherds on the other hand have learned that sometimes sheep need to be called, sometimes they need to be led, and sometimes they need to be prodded to go in the right direction. But if the shepherd does not have the trust of his flock, even prodding can be difficult if not impossible.

Was it trust that allowed Peter to join Jesus on the beach, to take the hand offered to him, profess his faith and accept his mission to follow Jesus' lead as shepherd? Was it the sense of belonging, being a part of something bigger and more important than his own fears that allowed him to step fully into his role as Peter the rock on which Jesus built his church?

This ability to trust allows our relationship with God to deepen and flourish. It happens through prayer. It happens in community. And as our relationship deepens, our trust grows, our doubts disappear and our faith is renewed and strengthened. Believing is a faith journey that comes when we are in community and living in the group, in the Body of Christ. If we just stand on the outside and watch, we miss the point and we miss the chance to belong and for our faith to be formed and strengthened in community.

Author and theologian Frederick Buechner once wrote: "Wherever people love each other and are true to each other and take risks for each other. God is with them." Perhaps that is why it is in community that we most often feel the presence of God in the form of the hand that reaches out to ours when we need it most.

May we today hear the voice of the Good Shepherd and know him who calls us each by name, and then send us out with gladness and singleness of heart that all peoples and races and tongues may hear his voice and see God at work in the world. Amen.

ⁱ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/what-do-you-think-the-messiah-should-be-doing/>