

Fourth Sunday of Easter – Elise Cranston

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

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of OUR hearts be perfect and pleasing in your sight O Lord, our Rock, and our redeemer. Amen

In the commentary "Feasting on the Word" Gary D. Jones uses a parable once told by Jesuit priest Anthony DeMello entitled "The Explorer." In this parable a man leaves his village to go and explore the faraway and exotic Amazon. While he is gone his experiences are unparalleled, and upon his arrival home his villagers are hungry to hear all about his travels. The man captivates the villagers with his tales of the beautiful waterfalls, extraordinary wildlife, and exotic foliage. But as the explorer attempts to explain all these things to the starving ears, he begins to ask himself: How can I put into words the feelings that flooded my heart through this journey? How can I explain the joy I felt sleeping in the open air at night or the danger that rushed through my bones as I swam the rapids? It became clear to the explorer that it was impossible. So he simply tells them that they must all go to the Amazon themselves. They have to experience what he is talking about to truly understand it.

We find somewhat of this same predicament in our gospel reading of John this morning. In verse 22 the Jews gather around Jesus asking him "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." People often press pastors or fellow Christians to "speak plainly" about the truths and character of God, and it is a true gift to be able to speak with clarity about one's faith and journey. However I believe we as Christians are charged with a greater task, a more important task. While we should strive to speak of our faith and journey, more importantly we should encourage others to make their own personal journey through which they will be able to experience the Living Lord. While we can't necessarily aptly explain God, we can experience him! Our hope is to have a direct, personal encounter with God. But what might this experience look like?

To answer that question, we can't overlook the sheep metaphor present in three of the four of our texts this morning. Sheep are symbolically used throughout the Bible to describe us as God's people. In fact sheep are made mention of a grand total of 500 times. God himself is depicted as a shepherd, Jesus declares himself the shepherd of God's people, and God's people are referred to as the sheep of His pasture.

This pastoral, shepherding metaphor, although more prevalent in the Old Testament world, proves persistent in the New Testament. In Mark 6:34 Jesus had compassion upon the crowd because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Luke is most famous for his distinct and memorable scene when angels pronounce Jesus' birth to lowly shepherds in the field. Luke also

writes of the parable of the lost sheep, later having Jesus come back to say that he came to seek and to save the lost. Matthew calls Jesus the shepherd of Israel.

Although this look into the importance of the metaphor of sheep and shepherds is necessarily brief, it illustrates the persistent and persuasive meaning of the metaphor of in the Bible. It's use might vary from book to book in the Bible, but one thing remains consistent: God names his people his flock, and commands those who lead his people to act as shepherds as He himself does.

It is clear that this metaphor made sense to the people writing our texts, but in modern America sheep and shepherds are generally unknown to us. And to compound the problem, there are negative connotations surrounding sheep. Sheep have become a metaphor for anyone who will blindly follow, who don't think for themselves, and who are easy to slaughter.

So there is a problem for the church today, we don't care to apply this sheep metaphor to ourselves. Nor do our Christian leaders apply the shepherd metaphors to themselves. They are often much more interested in being considered as the CEO's of their church rather than shepherds of God's people. As I read scripture, and especially these texts this morning I am left with the conclusion that God loves and desires to call us, his children, his sheep. Hopefully we can learn to play into our role as sheep, which can lead us to know and experience God's character as our loving shepherd.

So how can we as modern Americans, unaware of what sheep are truly like, become more like sheep and allow God to act as our shepherd? We must turn to scripture.

This morning our reading of Psalm 23 is a wonderful place to begin experiencing God as our shepherd. Let us not forget that King David the author of the Psalms, before he was a King was a shepherd. Psalm 23 begins with the famous words and clear description: "The Lord is my Shepherd." The primary duties of a shepherd are to guide, protect, provide food, deliver, and provide security. The clearest and best-known writings on these duties are found in the first five verses of Psalm 23. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me." Rest, refreshment, guidance, provision, protection, and His comforting presence: it is clear what Jesus will do for us if we can accept our role as his sheep.

As a shepherd so deeply cares for each of his sheep, so God deeply cares for each of us. This Psalm is not only a great illustration of how to experience God as our comforter and protector but there is a life-giving promise that we must not forget. Hope and joy come with the last verses of King David's Psalm: "Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." What a promise God our shepherd declares for us his sheep!

Reading John's gospel it becomes clearer that God incarnate in the person of Jesus is someone to be experienced. Jesus responds to his demanding inquirers that he has already plainly told them what they need to know. The issue is that Jesus has told them not through their desired plain talk but through his works. Verse 25 "The works I do in my Father's name testify about me." It is obvious that Jesus' role cannot be reduced to a title; instead his identity as the Messiah, and as shepherd must be experienced.

This becomes clear with the later use of the sheep metaphor. In verse 27 Jesus tells the prodding Jews: "My sheep listen to my voice, I know them, and they follow me." These sheep trust Jesus not because of any rational or intellectual discernment but because they have experienced him as their shepherd through his works. We see this same relationship everyday. A child does not trust her mom or dad out of reason, but because she has experienced parental love!

Reading through this John text, Gary Jones author of the commentary "Feasting on the word" and I both conclude it is dangerous to live by the famous words "I think therefore I am", and perhaps even more dangerous to apply that to our faith. Our minds must be working towards the discernment of faith and ways of God, but perhaps we have relied too much on intellect to facilitate our Christian life. Thinking is helpful, wonderful, and necessary but our relationship cannot stop there nor can thought alone define our existence. Without denying the importance of thought and the mind in faith, perhaps Christians today need to seek or return to an authentic experience of God, an experience beyond our understanding and ability to describe. Let us not forget that the early church did not grow because of creeds, dogmas, theologies, but because via the Holy Spirit, the multitudes experienced the loving shepherding God Himself, the resurrected Christ, and the promise of a new life.

Somehow we must experience the inexplicable, unfathomable God. We cannot package him neatly into tidy thoughts so that we can speak plainly about him. John's texts, and many other places in the Bible, invite us to experience God as our shepherd. Jesus ends this John passage declaring, "I and the Father are one." Just as Jesus declares his role as shepherd in this gospel reading, so is God our shepherd.

Similar to the closing lines of Psalm 23, in John we find the same amazing promise for God's sheep. In verse 28 Jesus declares "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand." These words are a promise only God can give us, and what a life giving and eye opening promise! Experiencing God as our Shepherd, and truly believing and living into the reality that these words convey is a step towards knowing the wonderfully complex and incomprehensible character of God.

It is clear. We can begin to experience God as our shepherd. But! Take precaution about the shepherd metaphor becoming your only understanding of God, and limiting your view of our limitless God. There is more still. But again we are stuck with the problem of trying to speak plainly about God. The issue is that he is anything but plain. He is grand, he is all-powerful, he is

sovereign, and yet he is also personal as He is our God. Simplifying God to plain terms misleads the listener and can demean the subject of the discussion.

Often our desire for plain talk surfaces when Christians are bent on understanding and finding out what the Bible “really means.” I would argue that the Bible is not a coded message that can be cracked, but instead while reading the Holy Scriptures the Holy Spirit invites us to participate and experience rich narratives with multiple meanings. Those searching for the code to crack our Holy Scriptures, and desiring plain talk will continually find that there is nothing plain about a God who speaks from a burning bush, who declares to be “I AM WHO I AM.”

Let me be clear, although we cannot speak plainly about God, the good news, the gospel news is that God can speak plainly to us. If we think about it, do we really want a God that we can fit into our pockets, and be described with a singular sentence? No! I surely don't! We long for a God who is different from the fallen understandable human; we hope for a God who is far bigger than anything we can begin to comprehend. A God who created us, a God who called us into being.

God's character often hidden in the word of our Holy Scriptures, or inside our neighbors is dangerously simplified to fit the terms of those wanting plain speech. Although I agree, hope for, and find peace in the statement God is love, I find this single descriptor of God's character can be misleading when this one dimension is all I choose to understand. It seems that Christians are wont to believe that if God is love, God's only job is to love and therefore we all too easily interpret that to mean that He must keep our beloved ones and us safe from harm. I find that this one-dimensional look on God is one of the biggest reasons that often people's faith deteriorates during tribulations.

Today's vision from the Revelation to John takes a different perspective. In fact in this passage we find a clear reminder that pain and suffering is often a part of Christian life. Verse 14 “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation”, and then skipping down to verse 16 “Never again will they hunger, never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them nor any scorching heat.” And finally the ending of verse 17 “and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” God never promises that we will not suffer; in fact suffering has always been a part of the Christian story.

These believers had to hunger, thirst, sweat, and feel pain? But what about when King David writes “surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever!” How can both be true? How can we know God as shepherd and still suffer? How can He lead us beside still waters when we are in the midst of a great tribulation? We cannot simplify God's character through speaking in simple platitudes! God is too vast to be understood through one verse or one adjective. The jungle of His presence is too dense; the landscape of His love is too exotic, the breath-taking experiences in His presence too complex to flatten into a box or even a single book.

Our only response to this magnificent God is to do as John of Patmos calls his listeners to do- to worship. I want to close today by proclaiming the words from our Revelation text, and calling us all join with that great multitude that no one can count from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and nations. May we in worship of the one powerful and yet personal God ” cry out in a loud voice: Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the Throne, and unto the Lamb! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God forever and ever. Amen!”