

Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 22, 2018
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The Voice of Fear

“We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us.” Amen.

After Easter I had the opportunity to take a little time off. I thought about warm beaches and new places to explore. Visiting old friends at familiar haunts was also inviting. But a voice deep within my heart said, “do nothing.” I wasn’t sure what to “do” with that. No agenda, no responsibilities, no doing, just being.

At first, it was somewhat terrifying to plan nothing, and the quieter I got, the more I saw the frenzy around me. As the week progressed, ever so gently I was drawn into what felt meaningful and renewing. Turning away from “busyness” even for a short while, can give us perspective on the voices competing for our time and attention, demanding our loyalties. There’s a voice that compels us to produce and achieve, keeping us on the treadmill, sometimes without purpose or heart. There’s a voice that calls us to buy more, consume more, to quell our emptiness. We live with voices of fear, that there is not enough, that we are not enough.

Our scriptures today lead us to another voice, that of the Good Shepherd. The one who has laid down his life for us, calls us beloved and beckons us to follow. He not only leads us by still waters and green pastures, but walks beside us through our valley moments. Jesus warns us of those “hired hands” who may call us to follow, but ultimately will leave us defenseless in the midst of trouble. The way of the Good Shepherd is not always obvious or easy but promises to restore us.

Jesus said, “I know my own, and my own know me... And I lay down my life for the sheep.” Perhaps you would rather not be associated with sheep. But before we get too offended, I read that sheep are actually quite smart. They got the reputation of being mindless by cow herders who prod cows along from behind. Sheep will not be led from behind. They follow the one with whom they have formed a bond. Sheep respond to the unique shepherd’s call and not the voice of others. If only we were like sheep!

The image of Jesus as shepherd is particularly subversive when we consider its context. Shepherds in Jesus’ time were considered rough and lowly, living menial lives on the fringes of society. To allude to the religious leaders in power as “hired hands” or false shepherds was the greatest affront. Much like the people expected a mighty warrior in their Messiah, the image of a shepherd leading them was beyond their grasp.

So too, in our high tech, warp-speed culture, this gentle presence is often mistaken for weakness. The one who has the power to lay down his life and take it up again, also has the power to save us from the grip of fear. He comes to reveal God’s love for all people and lays down his life to help us see that we *are* enough. No power or list of achievements makes us deserving of God’s love that is given as gift. Laying his life down is more than an act of power. It is the promise that the God who knows suffering will be with us in all of our struggles so that we may live without fear.

More than ever it seems our culture is steeped in anxiety. Pick up any newspaper and you will read that we are facing financial disaster, nuclear threats, increased violence, suspicion of anyone who is considered other. As individuals, we may be grappling with the distress of unemployment or a diagnosis, or the loss of a relationship. Even the church wrings its hands at tight budgets, declining attendance, less cultural relevance. These individual and collective fears have a grip on our hearts. They drive our decisions and call us to paths that are not life giving. When we can clear away the noise, there is a steady call to us from our shepherd, to put away fear, to trust in God's provision and to follow in the way of love. For one who can conquer death can also save us from ourselves.

I find it a lovely coincidence that our scripture brings us pastoral, peaceful images, on the celebration of Earth Day. In 1969 a peace activist named John McConnell proposed to the United Nations Educational Science and culture summit, a day to honor the earth and the concept of peace. It has been observed annually to raise awareness of our interconnection with creation and each other. Perhaps the psalmist brings us to green pastures and still waters to encounter this God of peace who wants to be connected to us and who wants us to be connected to each other. Today of all days, find a moment to be in creation, to still the voices and listen for the Shepherd's call.

In this season of Easter as we celebrate Christ's victory over death, we are gently prodded to live as resurrection people, who trust that life and love will have the last word. Our reading from 1 John tells us that we know love by Christ's laying down his life, and we should in turn lay down our lives for one another. John the evangelist writes, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?" As long as we remain in fear, in our scarcity mentality, it only makes sense to pull in and protect ourselves. Yet love is one of those mysteries that multiplies when we give it away. There is enough to go around. We are enough to receive and give God's love. Can you remember those voices of encouragement that made a difference in your life? Know that someone needs to hear your voice. This is what it means to be the body of Christ, to remind one another of God's promises and to speak Jesus' message of love and grace. I invite you this morning, at a time of your choosing, to remind someone, "You are a beloved child of God, and you are enough."

May we all learn to walk beside still waters in our hearts so that we can hear that steady call of our shepherd, beckoning us to follow, leading us in the way of love. I would like to close with this prayer by Steve Garnaas-Holmes.

You are my shepherd. Not my fears. Not my desires. Not the machinations of my ego. Not my group and its partisans, my nation, my party, my church. You alone lead me in your path: not the path of being right, but the path of loving. Help me to discern your leading. Grant me the humble attentiveness to see you loving, and to join you loving, to love and to forsake all other ways. Grant me the courage to follow, even through the darkest valley. I follow you, like a lamb; and following me come goodness and mercy. Shepherd me in love. Amen.