

Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 7, 2017
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Life Abundant

“The King of Love my Shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never, I nothing lack if I am his, and he is mine forever,” Amen.

Earlier this week, I had the opportunity to spend a couple of days at Shrine Mont, our Episcopal retreat center. I have been going to Shrine Mont since I was a little girl, and much about it hasn't changed. On my way up to the stone chapel and labyrinth, I noticed a sign on one of the trees that had clearly been there for years, but somehow caught my attention for the first time. It said “Thou shalt show me the path of life.” As I thought about it, the very place I stood in that stone cathedral, held memories as a youngster on youth retreats, as a bride with all of life ahead, as a newly ordained deacon, serving for the first time. Here I had been shown the path of life. In subtle and not so gentle ways, the good shepherd has guided me into places of abundance I could never imagine. This is our source of comfort and hope, that we do not travel this journey alone, but have one who guards and guides us.

You may have noticed a theme throughout our readings today. Each year the fourth week of Easter is designated as Good Shepherd Sunday, when we reflect upon and celebrate Jesus as our shepherd and guide. The image of Jesus carrying a lamb on his shoulder with a shepherd's crook in his hand, is one I remember from Sunday school. The 23rd Psalm we recite, is one of the most beloved texts. Many of us know it by heart. Yet to a technologically advanced generation, these pastoral images may seem trite or irrelevant. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” puts us at odds with our consumer driven culture that always seems to be lacking something. Passages about still waters and green pastures remind us that our frenetic world aches for something it cannot define.

In the gospel appointed for today Jesus is not so pastoral, but rather direct as he addresses a community suffering under Roman occupation and oppressive Jewish laws. Jesus pulls his people in by his crook, away from false shepherds that rob them of life. Those would be the religious leaders who taxed the poor into poverty, starved the people and fed themselves, and traded sacred traditions for Roman peace. No doubt the people longed for a good shepherd. Jesus expressed his mission and ministry among them. “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” In contrast to all that would rob them, Jesus invited his followers not just to survival, but to flourish; not just to get by, but to thrive; not just to existence, but joy. Jesus offered a way of sustenance and strength, even in the face of death. Though his followers could not understand at the time, his words rang true for the very next generation of Christians, who by association to Jesus, were persecuted and driven out of the temple.

Now if we apply this imagery to our times, we can identify all sorts of false shepherds that pull us from the path of life abundant. We create comfortable sheepfolds that lull us into mere existence but steal our joy. Like sheep we wander from the voice that calls us home. Sometimes it takes our lives being stripped bare to quiet the competing voices, and our shepherd reminds us of whose we are.

I don't think it is happenstance that the psalmist says "he makes me lie down in green pastures." Sometimes it is only the merciful staff that stops us in our tracks. Forging our own path can be heady and empowering, until our own resources fail us. The way of the good shepherd is not always obvious or easy, but promises to restore our soul. We are to trust in the one who laid down his life for his sheep, so that we may find abundant life.

When I was in seminary, I did my clinical pastoral training at a residential senior center. I had the opportunity to be on the wing designated for the residents diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Many had suffered significant losses, living day to day, without hope. Each day at worship time, though short term memory escaped many of them, some songs and prayers pulled them into the present. I would often see those who seemed completely out of touch, mouthing the words to the old song, I come to the Garden or praying the 23rd psalm. An indelible image of a faithful Shepherd who walks beside them, even in the shadow of death, was easily recalled. Despite loss and sometimes confusion, God's promise was written on their hearts. "Surely mercy and goodness will follow me all the days of my life."

In this Easter season, let us consider our Shepherd guides us not just away from something, but to something. In First Peter we hear that "By his wounds we are healed" and we are in turn to bring hope and healing to others. As a community of faith, we can keep each other on the path of life abundant and we might just be the voice that calls someone back home.

I pray that we can hear the call of the good shepherd and not be afraid to follow him even into the dark paths. For we can surely trust in the one who faced suffering and death for our redemption and guides us to places of abundance we could never imagine.

I came across this poem written by David Whyte, called The Journey. I would like to share it with you this morning because its text points to our unseen path, where what seems loss in this world, may just signal our arrival into life abundant.

Above the mountains, the geese turn into the light again, painting their black silhouettes on an open sky.

Sometimes everything has to be inscribed across the heavens, so you can find the one line already written inside you.

Sometimes it takes a great sky to find that first, bright and indescribable wedge of freedom in your own heart.

Sometimes with the bones of the black sticks left when the fire has gone out, someone has written something new in the ashes of your life.

You are not leaving. Even as the light fades quickly now, you are arriving.

Give thanks for our Good Shepherd who shows us the path of life and beckons us to follow.
Amen.