

Fourth Sunday of Easter – May 3, 2020 – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony

Acts 2:42-47, 1 Peter 2:19-25, John 10:1-10, Psalm 23

Jesus said: “I am the good shepherd.” This morning we read as our gospel John 10: 1-10. Verse 11, is the sentence above. It is not part of the reading but I am taking poetic license and including it as I do think it belongs here. Jesus often uses symbols and metaphors that have meaning to his listeners as he teaches the crowds that flock to him in Galilee and Judea. John writing some decades later, has used the same metaphors and symbols to speak to his listeners, the newly gathered communities of Christians. We read these same words of metaphor and symbol centuries later. Like a Russian nested doll, each group of listeners hears something a bit different, something that fits their context and world. As each hears something slightly different, they each hear also the core meaning which does not change. Three tiers of listeners, three layers of meaning.

In the first, layer, the crowds who gathered around Jesus heard words that were powerful in their faith tradition. Words that stretched clear back to Moses, Aaron and the prophets, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Zechariah.

Jesus came to his contemporaries, bringing a message that the kingdom of God was about to come in full glory. The Jews had been waiting for this kingdom forever, waiting through all of the foreign nations that had ruled them. Waiting through Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia and now finally Rome. And now, excitedly, Jesus comes proclaiming that the Kingdom for which they had longed since the days of David and Solomon was about to be realized. Jesus said “kingdom” and the crowds heard “kingdom” but the word meant very different things. For the crowds the kingdom was a political and religious entity. God would come through his Messiah and take back the land from the foreign power and the Promised Land restored finally restored. Jesus on the other hand, meant something else when using the term kingdom. God’s kingdom would not be a place or a political entity but a way of living. This way of living in the Kingdom of God meant a return from the exile of foreign domination, a forgiveness of sins and the renewal of the covenant with God. Jesus announced the kingdom of God at hand, but the people did not understand because the terms they heard did not mean what they thought they meant. “I am the gate, I am the good shepherd.” I am. Those two simple words would have reminded the crowds of Moses encounter with God at the burning bush. “But Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you, and they ask me, What is his name? what shall I say to them? God said to Moses, I Am Who I AM.

When Jesus said to the people I am the good Shepherd, they heard two things. First, I am, the name given Moses to identify God. Jesus then was seen as having a special relationship with God, Jesus was the expected Messiah. They also heard the word shepherd. The metaphor of sheep and shepherd was one that had been part of Israel’s tradition since the time of Moses as well. God was the shepherd who would gather his sheep, Israel, and take them home to the

Promised Land. The image of shepherd for sheep came to be seen as the image for a King in like King David and like Solomon, wise and close to God.

The Shepherd, God, was a metaphor that was used by the prophets as well. They spoke of the one who would come to restore Israel. Ezra, Zechariah and Isaiah, all spoke of the shepherd as the king who was coming so that Israel could once again become what God had always intended her to be. Those who heard Jesus speak of sheep and shepherd heard the words God, King, Messiah. They were focused on what that Messiah would do. They recognized Jesus as the one sent from God, but they did not understand. And finally Jesus became more explicit. "I came that they might have life and have it abundantly." Abundant life.

Some decades later, John understood these metaphors and symbols in another way, a way colored by his experience of the risen Christ.

John was focused on who Jesus was not on what Jesus had done. For John, Messiah, was one who was divine and who was sent to save the ones who believed. Jesus, before his crucifixion spoke of being the anointed one, the one who was bringing God's Kingdom to fulfillment in Israel. Now, John, spoke of Jesus as the Son of God, divine, and as the one who would save those who believed in him. The abundant life promised was a life full of service and ministry, a life lived in relationship with Jesus who was now at the right hand of God the Father.

The crowds who gathered before the crucifixion, and the young church of John were living in anxious times. The question for both was the same. How does one remain faithful to God in a time of great stress and ambiguity? It is the same question that we ask now. How do we remain faithful to God in this time of great stress and anxiety?

Or, to put it in words that both John and the crowds in Jerusalem might understand, how is God among us through the risen Christ? What does salvation mean? They are really two parts of the same larger question. What does it mean to be saved, to have abundant life? It can mean as many things as there are people in the world. What we see as abundant can grow and change as we mature in our faith. Salvation too, can and does mean many different things to people. We can be saved in many ways and at different times in our lives. It is not or at least need not be one time, one event, or one action. I like Frederick Buechner's definition of salvation. "It is an experience first and then a doctrine." The experience is that which is primary, the doctrine is our attempt to explain that which we have experienced. Like the early crowds around Jesus, we don't always understand in the moments of salvation, only later do we come to realize what the experience has meant. God is among us through the risen Christ, offering hope, blessing, healing, and peace, offering salvation to each of us. For salvation too is in some sense a metaphor a word we use to describe that which is indescribable. It is the whole of our individual and unique relationship with God.