

## The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter Readings and Reflection

FIRST READING: Acts of the Apostles 2:14a, 36-41

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles:

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice, and proclaimed: "Let the whole house of Israel know for certain that God has made both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and they asked Peter and the other apostles, "What are we to do, my brothers?" Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is made to you and to your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call." He testified with many other arguments, and was exhorting them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand persons were added that day.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 23: 13a, 3b4, 5, 6

***The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.***

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. In verdant pastures he gives me repose; beside restful waters he leads me; he refreshes my soul.

***The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.***

He guides me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk in the dark valley I fear no evil; for you are at my side. With your rod and your staff that give me courage.

***The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.***

You spread the table before me in the sight of my foes; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

***The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.***

Only goodness and kindness follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for years to come.

***The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.***

SECOND READING: 1 Peter 2:20b-25

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Peter:

Beloved: If you are patient when you suffer for doing what is good, this is a grace before God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When he was insulted, he returned no insult; when he suffered, he did not threaten; instead, he handed himself over to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our

sins in his body upon the cross, so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you had gone astray like sheep, but you have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: John 10:1-10

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

Jesus said: "Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever does not enter a sheepfold through the gate but climbs over elsewhere is a thief and a robber. But whoever enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens it for him, and the sheep hear his voice, as the shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has driven out all his own, he walks ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice. But they will not follow a stranger; they will run away from him, because they do not recognize the voice of strangers." Although Jesus used this figure of speech, the Pharisees did not realize what he was trying to tell them. So Jesus said again, "Amen, amen, I say to you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. A thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy; I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly."

The Gospel of the Lord.

### **The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter Reflection**

My dad had a cousin who owned and ran a farm outside of Kokomo, IN. She inherited the farm from her father who built the farm around the turn of the last century. He died in 1960 in his early 80s. My father spent his summers there in the late 1920s and early 1930s. We visited the farm for a week every other year. She rented the fields to other farmers who raised field corn and soy beans. She also raised chickens and sheep. The great delight we had was to feed the chickens. I fed them only once inside their pen. They pecked at the feeder's legs. The sheep would run away from little kids.

I'm a city boy used to urban sights, sounds and smells. To smell manure as good country air, as my father called it, is as bad as following a diesel-burning semi-truck. Chickens always crowed around sunrise. I had lived with the delusion they crowed but once, not over and over. Sheep start to bleat when it's time to be let out to pasture. Fortunately they sleep until after the sun is well up. Chicken crowing sounds the same. Sheep bleating was different. I could pick out different voices. Some were high; others deep. It was possible to know a sheep by its distinctive voice. Someone had to go to open the gate from the pen where they slept into one of two pastures for them to graze. They would gather at the gate when it was time to feed. When they finished, they would gather and bleat to be let back into their pen. If I went into the pen to open the gate, since I was unfamiliar, they would scatter and wait until I left the pen before they went out to pasture or re-entered the pen.

I have never been impressed with the intelligence of sheep. I was always struck by the individual, distinct voices they had. Since we visited only a week every other year and listened either from a bed or front porch, I was never able to put the voice to the sheep. The farm hand who was the effective shepherd could.

As a city boy and get my produce, meat and eggs from the store, I was not used to getting them from a farm. Freshly picked corn was a tasty treat. Eggs from the chicken coop and really fresh fried chicken that had recently been walking around were an acquired taste. Fortunately, by the time we visited during July or August, the lambing season was over. As a result of these childhood experiences I have never been truly comfortable with Jesus' references to animal husbandry.

The sheep know the voice of the shepherd and the shepherd can know the individual voices of the sheep. From my experience of recognizing the different sheep voices, this makes sense.

The fourth Sunday of Easter has been dubbed, unofficially, Good Shepherd Sunday. In the three year cycle of readings, the gospels are all taken from chapter ten of the gospel of John. This year, A, Jesus does not call himself the Good Shepherd. He calls himself the Gate for the sheep. The sheep enter the pen or leave for pasture through the Gate; through Jesus. He describes the shepherd in this passage but does not say who the shepherd is. He describes the role of the shepherd to know, lead and care for the sheep. Sheep have been bred specifically for their docility and flocking behavior. It is part of their breeding that they follow a shepherd. This means that, in some ways, sheep are by nature dependent upon human care.

When I was a kid, I learned that the shepherd's crook was used as a walking stick for the shepherd as he led the sheep over uneven terrain. He used it as a cudgel or weapon against predators. It was also an important tool for the care of the sheep. Why is the business end of the crook, well, crooked? Why is there a hook on the top of the staff? Unshorn, really woolly sheep have a couple problems. They are specifically bred for thick, dense wool. This wool can become snagged or entangled in fences and foliage. If a sheep falls over on its back, like a beetle or a turtle, it cannot roll over and get to its feet unaided. I can remember having to wear snowsuits as a kid that included overshoes, snow pants with suspenders, and a coat that attached to the pants. The coat invariably had a hood which covered a hat. Mittens allowed for poor dexterity. I stopped having to wear one after I was three or four. I hated the things they were so stiff that if I fell over in the snow I had a hard time actually moving and needed some one to help me up. The shepherd would hook the crook into the dense wool to retrieve the sheep from entanglement or to help the critter to its feet.

In the gospel of John, Jesus calls himself several things. He refers to himself as the Word, the Son, the Messiah or Christ. He says that he is the, "Way, Truth and Light. He calls himself the Bread of Life. Jesus also says, "I AM." This is the name God used as he spoke to Moses from the Burning Bush. He is God. Later in chapter ten of John's gospel, he claims the title Good Shepherd too. Here, though, Jesus is the Gate through whom the faithful enter. Through Jesus to God; Jesus is saying. To inherit eternal life and the promise of God's Kingdom, Jesus told us we must first believe in the one God sent. God sent Jesus. We end our prayers, often, with the statement, "we ask this through Christ our Lord. The reason we do this is an integral part of our Christian faith. It is the way we follow and the means to eternal life.

What's more, Jesus will guide us on the way to God. He will tend us and give us the means to go to God. St. Paul has said that all is a grace; all is a gift of God. St. Augustine took Paul's statements on God's Amazing Grace and turned it into the Church's teaching. The goal, faith in God, is God's grace. The way to God is God's grace. The means to God is God's grace. At the heart of God's grace is Jesus.

This notion can be found, well put, in the fourth common preface from the old Sacramentary. This is one of my favorite prayers. "You have no need of our praise, yet our desire is itself your gift. Our prayer of thanksgiving adds nothing to your greatness, but makes us grow in your grace through Jesus Christ our Lord." Here's the same quote from our current Missal. "For, although you have no need of our praise, yet our thanksgiving is itself your gift, since our praises add nothing to your greatness but profit us for salvation, through Christ our lord." I'm very sorry that we can no longer use the former translation. It sounds and reads better.

The Mystery of God's Grace is one that flies in the face of our human experience. We can think that when we do something for the "greater honor and glory of God," we are giving to God a good gift. The mystery of grace says that doing the deed is really God's gift to us. St. Augustine expressed this ambivalent experience like this. This is a paraphrase. Everything depends upon God's grace. We can do good only through God's grace. However, we act and work as if it all depends upon us.

We all believe in Jesus. We all worry about gaining eternal life. Am I worthy? We used to pray, and again I miss them, in these words, "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the Word and I shall be healed." Faith in Jesus, the promise of God's love, mercy and forgiveness and the means to them are all grace and gift won for us through Jesus. He died on the Cross to forgive us. He was first to rise as we will. The Word he speaks is our name.

Having spent two whole pages on the theology reflected in the gospel, how does the gospel relate to life? I am always wary of preachers who speak eloquently of the things of heaven that speak of pie in the sky. This may read well on paper, but how does it fit into our lives as we live them. We have never heard God's voice or seen God's face. Some of us live with little or no income. We all live under threat of being infected by the COVID 19. There is the possibility of death from it. As more and more people contract the disease, the death toll rises. Some of us have already lost family, friends or acquaintances. The longer it takes to develop an effective treatment of symptoms and a viable vaccine to inoculate us, the more likely the disease will be to touch us. Is the voice of Jesus only able to call us to heaven when we die?

How does God heal, help or console? It can take an effort to discover this because we have a strong tendency to expect a stupendous and clear miracle. We want to see the mighty and loving hand of Jesus to enter, physically, and intervene to take away our problems. This is simply childish. Faith is not smoke and mirrors. Religion is not a defensive shield or panacea. Our belief is in a God whose voice we do not hear with our ears and do not see with our eyes. The way we see or hear is through discernment.

The basic notion of discernment is simple. How does one choose a new car? What is important? What do I want? What do I need? How much can I afford? Will I fit into an Italian sports car? How long might I live? To discern which car to buy we ask questions. We can also consult. Talking to others can help in discernment. Advice, experience and council are important for us

to hear. There's also Consumer Reports. One can also listen to all the car commercials as they tell us to be safe and buy their cars and make a spur of the moment choice on line and have it delivered! What a world we have.

The process of discernment also is effective in the life of faith. When we learn, sometimes we learn facts. "In Fourteen Hundred and Ninety Two, Columbus sailed the Ocean Blue." The reality of learning is a bit more complicated. Learning by experience is also a possibility. Fixing a bicycle, as a kid, can teach mechanical skills. Pursuing an interest or hobby can lead to a lifetime of learning new things. The best of teachers I've had could inspire by asking good questions. In asking questions, one can always ask another. When confronted by a mystery or an unknown, any of us can ask, "Yes, but what does it mean?"

How does God speak our name? God gave us life! God called us into being! We are alive! This is obvious, but can we not hear God's voice at our life? At Baptism the one who poured the water called our name. God spoke through the one who baptized. Since we are all practicing social distancing, the voice on the phone who speaks to us or our voice speaking to others keeps us connected. Can we hear God's voice in others' voices? We can spend a lot of time by ourselves today. Has the thought of God yet slipped into our thoughts? Have those thoughts been unbidden, serendipitous? Perhaps those are the closest we will come, in those moments to really hear.

I'm reminded of this passage from the book 1 Kings of the experience of Elijah, the prophet:

<sup>11</sup>Then God told Elijah, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before The LORD.' For at that moment The LORD was going by. A mighty hurricane split the mountains and shattered the rocks before The LORD. But The LORD was not in the hurricane. And after the hurricane, an earthquake. But The LORD was not in the earthquake.\* <sup>12</sup>And after the earthquake, fire. But The LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire, a light murmuring sound.<sup>e</sup> <sup>13</sup>And when Elijah heard this, he covered his face with his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

A light murmuring sound can be easy to miss. There can be so much noise and expectation surrounding the voice of God.

In 2011 my sister and mother moved from the Chicago area up to where my brother moved in 2005. My family now lives 200 miles to the north in Two Rivers, WI. On May 9, which is my anniversary of ordination to the priesthood, my sainted mother will turn 90. Mothers' Day will be the day after. I will not drive up this year. We are at high-risk, over the age of 65. I have only missed her birthday once. In 1993 I was on Sabbatical in Ireland. On the 11<sup>th</sup>, she and I were to take a train to Sacramento California to visit my aunt and cousins and her sister-in-law and niece and nephews. My aunt is a few months younger than my mom. They weren't sure how many more opportunities they have to visit. I spoke to my mom on Tuesday. She let me know that Amtrak refunded us for the tickets. These are merely inconveniences. They are easier to let go when I think of the possibility of passing on a potentially deadly infectious disease to my only loved ones. I believe that the voice of Jesus can speak through these actions. We all agreed when we spoke. If one cannot do the best thing, one can always do the next best thing. I say

---

\* Ex 13:22h; 19:16g

this from the point of my feelings, loss and separation. This course of actions feels like second best. I want to go. As a believer and through the eyes of faith, I know it's really the best thing to do. It merely feels like the next best thing to do, I know that to stay put is the best thing. In consultation with my family, this is our discernment.

All the stuff of the Gate, the Good Shepherd, the Way, Truth and the Life can be found for each of us. All it takes is a little time and effort. God guides us through Jesus.

Keep others well as you stay home and keep at least six feet distant, only through God's grace.

James D. Beath

May 2-3, 2020