

4th Sunday of Eastertide

Sermon 5.7.17

Scripture: Acts 2:42-47
John 10:1-10

Across the meadow where I walk the dogs was a deer.

It was a midwinter morning, and the snow cover had hardened to crust. Daisy, our littlest dog, trotted over the top of it without a problem. Brigitta, the midsized one, broke through every tenth step or so. Gus, the biggest and oldest and slowest, crunched through, as did I, unless he stayed on the path that we'd made by own footsteps over the course of every morning.

The deer noticed us before we noticed it—its tensing and raising its head the motion that had me notice it. It was maybe 400 yards away from us, fine and fierce. It cut its frame at the edge of the woods into which, seconds hence, it would run and disappear. Even in flight, though, it would project power. This was its terrain.

Now, I know for several of you deer are a hassle. They eat your gardens. They behead your hostas. But even you have to admit, there's something beautiful about them, a beguiling combination of delicate and powerful.

As soon as it sensed us, though, sniffing the air and or hearing the silly, irregular crunching of my clownish bunch of terriers, it began its leap to safety, the wooded cover. And at this, my three sensed *it*, and off they ran, barking and falling over their own feet and then turning on each other, Daisy as always annoyed by Brigitta's quickness and youthfulness, Gus then barking to get the two girls to calm down because, really, he's just an old man who wants some peace and quiet. But you know what happens when you tell someone to calm down...

When they reached the edge of the woods, the deer long gone, they gave up the chase, turned back toward me and resumed our regular walk. They'd spend the rest of the day sleeping off that mad sprint—Gus on the green chair, Daisy on the red sofa, and Brigitta in the boys' bed.

As for me, I needed a nap too—a long one. This was shortly after inauguration day, and the long election season and its distressing result (to me at least) had me on high alert. So anxious had I been that, one lunchtime in late November, I broke a tooth while eating a salad. Its jagged edge had yet to be dulled, lo, these weeks later and it had become as a reminder that

things, which had once seemed smooth and orderly, had now somehow become sharper, barbed.

There was something about this sight then: beautiful and comical and perfectly right—deer behaving as deer and my dogs behaving as dimwits and I behaving as someone who walks every morning come what may—that was comforting. The sun will come up, the snow will soften and freeze and become crust, the earth will turn, spring will eventually come. It soothed my heart.

As you might know, I'm on Facebook; and, as you might have gathered, I enjoy participating in that cyber-gathering. As an introvert, I find it a measured way of being sociable, connecting with people near and far, and with friends new and from long ago. (I remember reading somewhere that introverts tend to like Facebook more than extroverts do.) As a writer, I enjoy the platform as a prompt. (How best to craft what I have to say in so little space where people just scroll along?) I also enjoy my "wall" as a curated expression of what I value and find interesting in life.

Now, as you might assume, my newsfeed (which is where your friends' posts show up for you to read) had since the election become a place of expressed anxiety. Most of my friends were as distressed, or more so, as I was about the coming administration. So, when I got home from the walk, I posted about it. Meant as a calming agent, "Meanwhile," I wrote, "there are still deer who graze in meadows and silly dogs who run after them and snow that crunches under foot," something like that. It wasn't important; it was just a reflexive offering of something soothing I'd been able to experience first hand.

I was surprised, then, as the comments began to roll in. "You shouldn't let your dogs run after deer!" I wrote back, "It was a short sprint. Rest assured, my dogs didn't stand a chance."

"Dogs can traumatize deer," another wrote. "Not in this case," I wrote. "My three had the same odds of overpowering that deer as I'd have grabbing an airplane out of the sky and throwing it to the ground. Everyone's fine."

A third wrote, though after I'd signed off, "Being chased like that makes deer anxious, to the point where they're really at risk."

And another: "Dogs will run deer to death. They'll 'pack' together and aggress on the deer."

Oh, was my thought when I'd logged back on, sort of like all of you are doing to me right now? Just a few hours away from Facebook and my wall had become a Deer Defense League. And these are people who know me, and in some cases know my dogs, and I don't think I'm known for unleashing violence on the world around me. I mean, I have my moments, but...

I attempted damage control, writing a general comment, "Alright, everyone. I hear you. But please know, no deer died in the incident in the meadow. My dogs are well tended, never left alone long enough, to say nothing of amidst large enough swaths of wilderness, to run deer to death. It really was a brief moment of the domestic meeting the wild, and each then going back to where they belong."

I deleted the post.

Weird, right? As if the whole world were on edge at the possibility, the likelihood, that something had suddenly come unleashed, that power let loose was about to get aggressive, even punitive, every encounter felt now fraught with the probability that things would get out of hand, that violence could break out at any moment and someone would end up dead.

But who was the powerful, and who was the powerless? And what happens when there's a sudden flip, when those who have felt themselves as powerless suddenly are the ones holding the reins? Worse, what happens when everyone feels vulnerable, frighteningly vulnerable, so everyone's ready to attack for the sake of self-defense? When everyone presumes they're the next victim, they might easily become a perpetrator.

It doesn't have to be this way.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. Always the fourth Sunday of Eastertide, this is a themed Sunday that's dropped into our otherwise resurrection remembrances—and for reason I don't know and can't determine. Amidst the stories of Jesus appearing, though now dead, yet alive, to friends hither and yon, here we're unexpectedly to think in terms of shepherds and sheep, sheepfold and pastures, and to hear assurances of good guidance and tender, though forceful and persistent, care. The Good Shepherd demonstrates a sort of faithfulness to the task that no amount of waywardness in the sheep, or dimwitted defiance, could possibly sway.

Year A's lections about the Good Shepherd are a little abstruse, though. In the other years, we hear Jesus say outright, "I am the good shepherd," as the gospel reading for Easter

4, Year B begins; or we hear him speak of “my sheep,” of which he claims, “I know them and they follow me,” as makes up most of Easter 4, Year C.

As it happens, these all three come from the same discourse, so it’s a little clearer when taken whole that Jesus can be thought of as a good shepherd, *the* good shepherd. But this section taken alone is flitting when it comes to how to imagine Jesus.

Is he the shepherd who enters through the gate? This he seems to imply in saying, “The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep,” which is contrast to those who do not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climb in by another way. These are thieves or bandits; these are people whose purpose as regards the sheep is something other than that the sheep might have life and have it abundantly. I suppose we’re to wonder whom in our lives or our life together might be such a bandit, someone who regards the flock not as intrinsically valuable but as an instrument toward another end.

Or is he the gate itself? This he more than implied; he said, “I am the gate for the sheep...I am the gate,” which suggests he is the means by which the sheep are shut in or let out.

I’m not quite sure what to make of this morphing metaphor. But that’s not to say I’d appreciate more clarity and fixity. On the contrary, I think the more ways we have of imagining and understanding whom Jesus is and why he’s come, the better. We’re talking about what abides as true, after all, and this (what’s true) will always outstrip however we define it or understand it. Given this, if our thinking as regards the things of God becomes too easily summed up, or too fixed on one or another certain supposition, then we’re not doing true theological thinking.

The main ingredients for true theological thinking, it seems to me, are wonder, awe.

John seemed to think this as well, which is perhaps why he remembers Jesus as understanding himself in so many ways: “I am the true vine,” “I am living water,” “I am the way,” and as the lamb of God. That final one, though not something he said of himself, is something that, when twice said of him, he didn’t dispute.

So here are two more: he is the shepherd who enters through the gate, and he is the gate.

One thing that *is* consistent here, though, is about where the shepherd leads the sheep: he leads them out.

This is no big thing in most cases. In the case of most sheep and most sheepfolds, to be led out is a typical, regular thing. Shepherds gather their flocks into folds, as at night for safety from predators, and then, the next day perhaps, they lead them out to pasture to find good grass. Of course, right? Because if the sheep were to stay in their folds all the time, they'd run out of grass in short order. But if they were never to gather in their folds, they'd be prey for wild animals.

There's one sheepfold, though, where the sheep, once led in, would never have been led back out. That's the sheepfold inside the Sheep Gate in the Temple. And though Jesus wasn't here speaking necessarily of the Temple, and neither was he speaking in the Temple, he is said to have just left the Temple, left with the man who was born blind whom he'd healed and who, now seeing, would join the movement.

He had been a useful fixture where he used to sit and beg — this man born blind. He'd been useful in making other people feel good about themselves — offering this unfortunate man money, feeling the right amount of pity and sympathy, and assured of their own blessedness because “there but for the grace of God go I.” But now he was gone, and this useful tool became a scandal. How had he come now to see? And, no longer useful, everyone disowned him — but Jesus.

An earlier healing, though, had had Jesus at the Sheep Gate, where many people — invalids, the poor, the orphaned or widowed — would beg for money and mercy. Here Jesus healed a man who'd been sick for thirty-eight years. So it's this gate, and this particular sheepfold, that Jesus might have had in mind when he said, “Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”

The sheep that entered the Temple sheepfold, entered by way of the Sheep Gate, would never have been let back out. Those sheep would have been led further in, to the altar of the Temple, where they'd be slaughtered as a sacrifice. This is to say that, in that sheepfold, all the sheep are just waiting for their own death.

To be led out, then: to be led *out* would be actually to be saved.

Of course, if you want to get all existential about it, sheep of every sort are these sorts of sheep. Maybe not bound for the altar for sacrifice, sheep are bound from someone's dinner table. They are bound for slaughter; that's why they're kept at all.

And if you want to get even more existential about it, aren't we all as sheep just awaiting slaughter? No one gets out of here alive, after all. So, whether it's a glorious death, in service of some greater cause, for example, or an ordinary death, painful, humiliating, a slow, inexorable decline, this whole thing is just a sickness unto death. This whole sheepfold of a world is but a holding pen, a stressful, crowded, zero-sum holding pen where the most we can hope for is grabbing after whatever goodies we might manage to stumble across. To soothe us while we wait out the pointlessness of it all, to amuse ourselves while we await the inevitable: grab whatever you can, and defend it and yourself at all and any cost.

It doesn't have to be this way.

When Jesus said that whoever enters the sheepfold by the gate that is himself, and whoever follows him into that sheepfold so to be led back out, and that he came that we might have life and have it in abundance, he was getting all existential, I think. He was speaking from the recognition that life *can* be lived as if amidst a holding pen of a world, wherein, like sheep, all that exists serves but utilitarian ends, wherein nothing and no one has any intrinsic value, and wherein the living of things is sustained by the death of other things. Moreover, though, he was speaking from the promise that there is another way to live, that somewhere there is such a pasture where life is full and rich and free, and that there are such sheep that aren't valuable because of their utility but because of their existence. Merely in being is their value; merely in being is *our* value.

And I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, "That's impossible." I know it because that's what I'm thinking too. I have no idea where such a place is, how to imagine it spatially and technically and in terms of history and matter and the laws of nature. I have no idea how to account for all the ways that such a miraculous conception breaks long-established rules of how existence is even possible. I can only wonder in awe at the promise that is akin to the burning bush—that ancient, impossible thing, a bush burning but never consumed.

But as it happens I think wondering in awe is enough.

Did you notice that what drew the church together in those earliest days was an awe that came upon the people? It wasn't persuasive argument as regards the truth claims of the gospel, or a common sense of mission, or a set of tasks that gave them a sense of purpose and productivity. It wasn't faith-based talking points, the posits of faith that you either assent to

and therefore belong or dissent from and are cast out. It wasn't coercion. It wasn't fear. It was wonder. It was awe.

So let us gather in awe: that the state of nature can be transcended. That the natural state of things—that is, as Hobbes identified it, as a war of all against all—and which we're flirting with in our geopolitics like never before in recent memory, can be transformed, redeemed.

Let us gather in wonder that, though we know not how this can be, we yet know what we are to do: forgive, be resilient in faith, and open ourselves to the folly of hope.

Let us gather in praise, that though there is much to lament, not to mention much to resent, we know—and by experience—that it's simply a better, more abundant way to live. It's simply better to be proven wrong about the world and our narrow little conclusions about "that's the way it is," than to be proven right about who started it all and getting even. Let us rejoice at how wrong we so often are.

And let us listen for the one whose way is out of all that, out of the snares and snags that catch us up, out to where life is abundant, full and rich and free.

Thanks be to God.