

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

Sermon 4.22.18

Scripture: Psalm 23  
John 10:11-18

Jesus seems eager for his hearers to understand that he wasn't to be a victim. He would freely choose to give his life. "I lay down my life," he explained that day, "in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again."

He was saying this to some Pharisees who'd come to investigate a man who was born blind but who received sight when Jesus made mud and rubbed it on his yet unseeing eyes. These Pharisees came along after the fact and wanted to know of the man by what authority Jesus was doing these things. But the man had little say that would help them. So they drove him out, which Jesus later learned and which spurred him to return to this now-seeing man. When Jesus found him, he explained, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."

Some of the Pharisees also heard him say this, though we don't know if they were the same Pharisees as had been searching for him, or different ones. Little matter. They took exception at this, saying, "Surely we are not blind, are we?"

Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see', your sin remains."

It's not so clear what Jesus meant by this. As usual, Jesus' response was cryptic. It seems to me he meant that sin is less sin when you know you're blinded by it, that sin is more sin when you think it doesn't apply to you, when you think you see fully.

It's important, apparently, to know your own condition, to recognize how little you actually see and can fully take into account. Secretary of Defense under George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, once famously said, as regarded U.S. strategy in the Iraq War, "There are known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns." He got mocked for this because it seemed emblematic of his bumbled thinking overall and our bungling this war that was wrongheaded from the start. The thing is, I think he was saying something true here—that there are things we know we

know, things we know we *don't* know, and things we don't know we don't know. Ignorant even of our own ignorance, we'd be wise at least to keep this in mind.

Similarly, Stephen Hawking is said to have said, "The greatest enemy of knowledge is not ignorance, it is the illusion of knowledge." Keeping wise to this might be our best hope at wisdom. Yet the Pharisees didn't display that sort of humble wisdom. They seem not to have known that there were things they didn't know—which might have been one quality that made them as mere hired hands. As regards the flock of which Jesus is the good shepherd, these Pharisees Jesus suggested were as mere hired hands.

Not a good look.

It was perhaps especially upsetting if the Pharisees understood themselves in the terms laid out in the twenty-third psalm, which might have been the case. After all, shepherd imagery had long been a powerful image in their tradition, which is our tradition. Moreover, it might have been a powerful inspiration for "religious" leadership, as it was one of the most enduring images in all of scripture, Old Testament and New. And who knows how beloved this one psalm was of all the 150 psalms? Who knows how central to their sense of faithful leadership, perhaps even their self-image, this currently most beloved psalm was? Really, maybe Pharisees could recite this psalm as if a mission statement for themselves, some anyway: "He leads beside still waters, he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." Maybe this is what inspired some to serve as Pharisees in the first place.

To be suggested as other than a good shepherd, then, to be suggested as just a hired hand: this might have come as a real shock.

I've never preached on Psalm 23, though it comes up in the lectionary every year. On this fourth Sunday of Eastertide, this so-called Good Shepherd Sunday, it's there in the lectionary to be included in worship somehow. We usually use it as a call to worship rather than as substance for preaching because, really, what is there to say? Even those among us who've least read the Bible know this one, and moreover understand this one.

This might be why it's so often used as a reading for funerals and memorial services. That it doesn't need much interpretation in order to make it intelligible and not merely obtuse or, worse, threatening: you can't say that about most of what you find in the Bible. See, the Protestant movement gets it wrong when its ever-lower offshoots imply that the Bible is easy and revealing for

anyone to read. The Catholics got it right when they asserted in response that the Bible is a “dumb and difficult book.” Not dumb as in stupid, but dumb as in unspeaking, the Bible needs to be ingested in a group context and interpreted for current and inspired thought—whether by clergy or by congregation, or by both if you ask me.

As it happens, one reading for next week features a man, a eunuch, who encounters Philip of the early church just as this eunuch is trying to understand a piece of scripture. Philip asks him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” and he replies, “How can I, unless someone guides me?”

This is true about most of what you’d come across in the Bible. It’s not true about the twenty-third psalm.

But I do have a couple things that occurred to me as I spent the week ruminating on it.

The first: that with the Lord as your shepherd, you shall not want. This is easy to hear as the Lord supplying all needs and therefore leaving the one for whom this Lord is shepherd in a state of total fulfillment.

True as this might be, though, I hear something else too. Not to want is not only a matter of having all your needs met, it’s also (and I’d say moreover) a state of not *wanting*, a state in which you don’t suffer the condition of wanting, wanting stuff, which is all the more a suffering state when it’s in no regard to what that actual stuff might be.

This is the state in which I think many in our society live and dwell. This state of *wanting* is where I think much of our society abides and sets up shop. I remember one of the few times I ever went to Target with Tobias as a young boy. Unaccustomed to department stores, he stood for a couple mesmerized moments in the toy aisle. Then he asked to leave. It didn’t feel good to see all this stuff that he never wanted until that moment. Somehow he realized he’d been happier before knowing about it all, which was coupled (of course!) with wanting it all.

Same with me following the last few days. We went to Hershey, Pennsylvania for the second half of the boys’ school break—a trip I highly recommend to each and all, if only to understand more fully the modest excellence of our own Eric, and Nathan, for whom Pennsylvania is homeland, and Wayne and Donna, nurtured in the Mennonite way. The astonishing goodness of Milton Hershey goes a long way to explain how others of that region and culture came to be as they are.

But more on that later, some other Sunday.

As for now: candy. On the drive home, following a last stop at Chocolate World to pick up a few gifts and to fulfill a few last minute candy needs, I had the thought halfway home that I should have bought a bag of Cherry Nibs because I could use a handful of bite-sized twists as a boost.

Now, I don't eat candy, and I have never, *never* regretted not having bought a thing that you can literally buy at every gas station, convenience store, and grocery store across the continent. But there I was, wanting something I'd spent the last two days exposing myself to the suggestion that this is something I *would* want.

This promise, "I shall not want": it harks back to the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment, that we're not to want our neighbor's house, or our neighbor's wife, or his slave, or donkey, or anything our neighbor has, a runaway covetousness that's written into this runaway commandment. Really, that we're not to *want*, that we're not to operate from a state of want: it's a word translated in the Ten Commandments as "covet," but it's actually the same word for want. This *wanting*, this covetousness or (perhaps envious) compulsion toward acquisition, this which in Jacob's case was called "grabbing at the heel," this is all a warping of honest relationship and goodness of being. So when the Lord is my shepherd and I shall not want, I shall not suffer in the state of discontented wanting and my relationships shall not suffer that as well: this comes as an enormous relief.

Now the second: the moment when the psalm turns from being about the Lord to being to the Lord, the moment when the Lord becomes less something to talk about and more someone to talk to or with. Yes, we're to tell of the gracious works of the Lord. Yes, we're to proclaim the Lord's greatness of mercy and love. But perhaps more so we're to *feel* this mercy, this graciousness, this love. So, this moment when the Lord is no mere matter for description and proclamation—"He leads me in paths of righteousness;" is now an intimate: "...thou art with me." When you realize the one whose qualities you're extolling is there with you in the room, overhearing your conversation, closing in on you and laying bare your need and love: "...thou art with me."

I don't have any preacherly interpretation to offer here. I just mean to point it out and I suppose also to admit to you that I'd always thought the hard part of this life of faith is in proclaiming that faith, proclaiming the good works of the Lord. Spending the week with this

psalm, though, I realize I've become more comfortable in the pulpit than in personal prayer, more comfortable speaking about the Lord than to **the Lord**.

Time to correct that.

I wonder if this was true of the Pharisees, or true at least those whose leadership gave the Pharisees a bad name.

I wonder if it was partly this, then, that had Jesus giving them such a hard time—mere hired hands.

Ouch.

Of course, Jesus had an absurd standard for what made a good shepherd. That he would lay down his life for his sheep, this so-called good shepherd would have been strangely impractical. No one in the whole world would have expected a shepherd to give up his life for his sheep. In fact, most would argue that this would make for a strikingly bad shepherd, engaged in so dramatic and yet useless an act. A shepherd who gave his own life over to a wolf preying on the flock would just leave the flock at still greater risk.

Now the flock is without shepherd altogether, so just how good is that?

Of course, we know that Jesus wasn't speaking here of an actual shepherd herding actual sheep. He was speaking of himself as someone who'd surrender to the powers and principalities before turning on, and turning in, any of his (albeit often bumbling) followers.

I think of Nikki Haley "thrown under the bus" this week because of the feckless president she's unfortunate to serve. As Ambassador to the United Nations, she spoke of coming sanctions against Russia, which the rest of administration later denied were forthcoming. But so what? Mr. Trump's survival is all that matters, some jumble of facts and fictions that he can crochet together to wrap himself in, a self-soothing story of his own greatness.

Jesus (it should come as no surprise to anyone) is something else altogether. He's not going to throw any of his disciples under a bus. He's not going to turn on any of us, not even when push comes to shove, not even when it comes to arrest and trial and crucifixion.

And, sure, as an actual shepherd, this leaves quite a lot to desire.

So the metaphor falls apart a bit, falls really into an absurdity. But that's okay. The map isn't the territory, and the metaphor isn't the reality it's meant to suggest.

On the other hand, the ultimate absurdity of the metaphor (that a good shepherd is one who'd lay down his life) is suggesting of the absurdity of the gospel. Somehow, somehow, a self-giving shepherd is exactly what we need. For overturning the power of death, for undermining the threat of shame and punitive pain and ultimate defeat, for calling into question the whole sacrificial enterprise—both the clearly religious one with its altars and scapegoats and spilt blood and offered sheep, and the more unconscious ones with their groups established on the basis of who's cast out—any savior *must* be self-sacrificing. Really, anything other than such a savior would only reify dynamics that rely on death, would be one more leader willing to throw any and everyone else “under a bus.”

And yet it's important not to mistake Jesus as a victim, even if the ultimate victim. It seems important to him, at least, and according to John, that we not understand Jesus as a victim. And who knows why this was so important to Jesus, or at least to John and to the community for whom John wrote this gospel? Who knows whether there was some dynamic at play that courted victimology among the Johannine community, “victimology,” as we might call it today? “The possession of an outlook, arising from real or imagined victimization, that seems to glorify and indulge the state of being a victim:” if this wasn't a dynamic at play in the Johannine community of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, it is most certainly a dynamic at play these days. The competition as to who is the greatest victim, the race as to who is most deserving of our collective compassion and our most aggressively beneficial policies and rhetoric: this loser-as-winner is a strange insistence.

Yes, it's worthy to consider who are the scapegoats in our society's arranging itself. Yes, of course, it's imperative even to correct for disadvantage that's built into our systems, for some a disadvantage that's built in from the beginning. But it's a mistake to imagine that being a victim makes you righteous, that being a victim is the thing by which one is made righteous. Jesus wasn't righteous because he was victim, Jesus was self-giving because he was righteous.

Really, we worship Jesus not because he was a victim, but because he chose to be self-giving that none of us must go the way he chose himself to go—that is, unless we so choose as well. But this wouldn't make us victims. It would, on the contrary, have us acting in protection of those who'd otherwise be victimized—for acting in the way of the gospel, acting in the way of Christ, isn't acting from a place of powerlessness, but from a place of power, though power put in service of the good.

So, really, we worship Jesus not because he was a victim, but because he was righteous, because he was self-giving and he was powerful to save for being the ultimate sacrifice, which is to say that last legitimate sacrifice. All others whose death we demand that we might have life in safety and security and wealth and happiness: all these who are enslaved for our well-being: all these are illegitimate sacrifices, unjust. We can no longer with impunity set up such systems of scapegoating. No, for now it's up to us who would follow Christ to bring such systems to a peaceful, if sudden, stop, even to offer ourselves that these might no longer be seen as legitimate.

So don't believe Christians when they tell you they're being victimized. This is a deception for grabbing at undeserved privilege. It's moreover a distortion of the gospel. We offer ourselves amidst a world that has no interest in, or obligation to, our foolish, self-giving way. And yet this, and only this, is powerful to save us from this world whose dynamics depend on exploitation and death.

If you choose this way, you do so from a place of power, and moreover from a place of hope, joy, un-defeat. If *we* choose this way, there is little more to say but thanks be to God.