

4 Easter – 25 April 2010 – The Rev. Madelyn L. Betz

Acts 9:36-43 • Psalm 23 • Revelation 7:9-17 • John 10:22-30 • Easter 4 • Year C •
April 25, 2010 • St. Thomas, Hanover, New Hampshire

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Part of seminary training, in addition to academic work, is participation in a program called Field Education. It is a kind of internship, usually a year-long, where a seminarian is placed in a parish setting to be mentored by the rector and to participate in the life of that parish. At the seminary that I attended, Learning Agreements for Field Education carried certain requirements and also provided the opportunity to shape the experience for the benefit of both the parish and the seminarian.

My field education placement was at Grace Episcopal Church in Norwood, Massachusetts and my Learning Agreement necessitated my presence on some weekdays as well as on Sundays, so I traveled back and forth a lot. It was during this period that it was my pleasure to discover that the rector of the neighboring parish in Westwood was The Rev. Judith Freeman Clark, whom I had known here in New Hampshire, but whom I had not seen for several years. By email, we reconnected and set a date for lunch on a day when I had an appointment with my supervising priest. As you imagine such a reunion, it probably won't surprise you that we talked and ate and looked at the clock to see that it was already past the time that I was supposed to be in Norwood.

Judith said, "Oh, don't worry. Norwood is right next door. It will take you just a few minutes." And she began to give me directions for shortcuts over back roads, as my eyes glazed over and I had visions of becoming hopelessly lost. Our re-connection that had blossomed with joy quickly began wilting amidst my anxiety.

This week's lessons provide us with a wealth of imagery about ways that people interact with one another and the shifting roles we play. The texts for today mention leading, following, guiding, standing beside, and gathering around. I wondered this week what Easter insights these various examples could provide us as we consider Jesus as shepherd and ourselves as his sheep. The Church's desire for this relationship, as outlined in our Collect today, is that "when we hear his voice, we may know him...and follow where he leads..." the very words that Jesus used to describe his followers in the Gospel you've just heard me read. The lessons as juxtaposed this morning each provide an insight into how we might live into the fullness of relationship with God and with one another.

The stories recorded in the book of Acts are about newly transformed disciples, as today's story illustrates. Bold, sure, energetic to do God's work, Peter has become as famous as a rock star. When two men, whom he presumably does not know, appear at the door where he is staying and say "Come with us; we need you ten miles away without delay," the record says quite simply that he got up and went with them. The emergency was the death of a beloved disciple whose compassion for others had defined her life. In the fledgling early church, such a devoted individual must have been a powerful witness both in and out of the church community.

"All the widows stood beside Peter," weeping, grieving. But Peter had not come to stand with the mourners. He had come to deliver a sign of God's salvation. So in quiet, he knelt down and prayed, remembering whose love and power he had come to share. He

extended his hand to the woman and gave her back to her community, in a visible sign of new life.

Jesus had recently empowered Peter to live into new life when he had allowed Peter to affirm his love. “Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep;” [John 21:15, 16, 17] Peter was instructed in last week’s gospel. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus enters into the paradox of all good teachers—even while his disciples continue to learn and follow, Jesus empowers those same sheep to be transformed into shepherds, illustrating the continuum of the body of Christ and the reality that Jesus and the Father are One.

We can easily get stuck in the puzzle of the Book of Revelation, but perhaps it can serve, if we will allow it, as a mirror, reflecting back the amazing depths of our own daily existence and God’s presence in it. Beauty, mystery, power and grace are here for us now in perhaps surprising and unimaginable ways, for which we should be always be looking and ready to praise God. The truth and power of the resurrection is not about where Jesus isn’t, but it’s about where he is.

The surprising vision of today’s reading from Revelation expands the reach of God’s presence to include all nations, all tribes and peoples and languages. “John’s message here is that God’s love stretches toward all humankind. We are all God’s children. John’s vision allows us to claim a connection to God not through our ancestry but through our profession of faith.” [Christopher Miller, *Disciplines 2010*, p. 125] The people in this vision are depicted as standing around a throne with palm branches and shouts of praise—a re-do of the mere flash of insight that we celebrate on Palm Sunday; a re-do

that has rightly become an eternal triumphal scene of the Lamb upon the throne in the kingdom of God.

Jesus the Lamb is also the Shepherd who shelters, feeds, nurtures, and guides. The message of John's vision is one of comfort, consolation, security, and joy; a message of the fulfillment of "shalom," in all the richness of that ancient promise between God and human beings, a promise made to anyone who listens for the guidance of the shepherd.

Our Gospel story takes place at the time of a Hanukkah festival. "It was winter," the author notes. This seemingly insignificant detail sets the scene both physically and metaphorically as cold and harsh. The Jews in the Temple gathered around Jesus with a question. We don't know whether the scene was a friendly "gathering around" or a more intimidating and menacing assembly. Our imaginations can play with it either way. I think it is safe to surmise, though, that there was plenty of frustration and impatience to go around as they asked him "Are you the Messiah, or not?" They really didn't know, but they were expending a lot of energy on the possibility.

Jesus had told them, but they had not heard. He had shown them the answer with deeds, but they had not seen. And again, the metaphor of sheep and shepherd enters into the conversation. "My sheep hear my voice and follow me." The sheep are safe because they follow, not because they know the way.

So the image of shepherd and sheep is a dynamic one, in that the roles are not absolute. Through the metaphor, we learn both about the relationship between Jesus and his followers and about the relationship between ourselves and one another. The

metaphor teaches us that...

- First, Jesus is ready to lead and guide, when the path goes through the pleasant gardens of springtime or through the valley of the shadow of death.

- Second, we have to listen and be open to guidance. To seek or receive guidance is an acknowledgement that we don't have all the answers. It also helps if we're willing to be surprised along the way.

- And third, just as the Lamb and the Shepherd are one, and as we are members of his body, we become transformed from sheep to shepherds for one another in a reciprocal relationship that ebbs and flows as we each have need.

My friend Judith looked at me and stopped giving me directions. She said, "Never mind. I'll drive to Norwood; you follow me." It did in fact take only a few minutes. I made no wrong turns. I didn't get lost. I still didn't know the way, but Judith did. In that metaphor for the Christian life, she became the shepherd for me. She led and I followed. At the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus had said to the disciples, "Come, follow me." He says the same to us, as our shepherd and guide to abundant, resurrected, and eternal life.

Amen.