

May 8, 2022 Mother's Day. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray. God our helper, guide us into and through your word, that we might be shaped by your Spirit's message to us today and transformed for service in your world. Amen.

Our scripture today comes from the gospel of John, Chapter 10, verses 22 through 30. Listen now for the word of the Lord.

22 At that time the Festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, 23 and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. 24 So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." 25 Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me, 26 but you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep. 27 My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, in regard to what he has given me, is greater than all, and no one can snatch them out of the Father's hand. 30 The Father and I are one."

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

I have a friend who lives on a small cattle ranch out in Bitterwater, California - about 20 miles outside of King City. I've gone to visit her on the ranch a few times, and its on this beautiful spot of land with a ridge you can hike up to and see nothing but mountains for miles and miles. You can see the peaks of Pinnacles National Park, and see California condors. It's a special place. A place where I feel grateful to have been.

On the ranch she has more than just cattle, she has horses and chickens, and sheep. She doesn't have a lot of sheep - just about 10 or so. And she bought these sheep because she has a young border collie that she is training to herd the cattle, and so she bought sheep, to teach and train the dog to herd the sheep before introducing her to cattle.

One time when I was there she showed us how the dog herds the sheep. and it was incredible to watch the instincts of the dog come alive. The border collie effortlessly guided the sheep to wherever my friend told her to lead them. and the sheep obediently went where they were told.

Something you may not know is that every year, in fact this Sunday, the fourth Sunday of Easter, is actually called Good Shepherd Sunday. A Sunday that celebrates Christ as the good shepherd. Our scripture certainly honors that in this

passage in John. Here Christ the good shepherd tells us that his sheep believe in him, know his voice. He knows his sheep. They belong to him and he gives them eternal life. He protects his sheep. No one will snatch them out of his hand.

This image of Christ as the good shepherd is one we're all familiar with. It's an image prevalent throughout the gospels and in the Old Testament. God is our shepherd. and we are God's sheep.

So as I was reflecting on this image as Christ the good shepherd on this Good Shepherd Sunday, the experience of seeing the sheep on my friend's ranch kept popping into my mind. And the more I thought about it, I grew quite frustrated because I did not like the comparison. I didn't want to see myself as one of those sheep in that small flock. They seemed so easily manipulated by the dog. Was I also so easily manipulated? Effortlessly pushed in a direction out of the fear of a dog nipping at my heels?

In a lot of ways, this comparison is not really a fair one. A shepherd tending to his flock in Jesus' time looked worlds different than the small flock on a small cattle ranch in California. But I think my frustration is still one and the same. The sheep are still sheep, easily manipulated by the world around them, vulnerable to the danger of the world around them.

The image of Christ as a shepherd comes up in our scripture for today, in Jerusalem in the winter, during the festival of dedication. The festival of dedication was established in 164 BCE to commemorate the rededication of the Second Temple after Antiochus (an- tie- uk- cus) IV had defiled it by building a statue to his own gods on the altar of burnt offering. You probably know the festival of dedication today as Hanukkah, or the festival of lights, because it features the lighting of lamps. A festival still celebrated and beloved by Jewish communities all around the world.

And during this festival of dedication, scripture tells us Jesus is walking in the portico of Solomon. The portico of Solomon was an area in the eastern part of the temple protected from the inclement weather of the winter during the festival. and it was the oldest portico in the temple, named after King Solomon, who built the first temple.

And it's there - in this holy part of the temple during this joyous festival, that the religious authorities ask Jesus to end their suspense. To tell them plainly whether or not he is the messiah.

It's important to know the context of the Gospel of John. John uses the term 'the jews' quite often and always in opposition to Jesus. It's always 'the jews' who don't

understand him and oppose him. So much so that John's gospel has, sadly, been used as fuel for antisemitism through the history of Christianity.

John's gospel was written late in the first century in a specific Christian community that was undergoing a painful separation from the Jewish society its members had belonged to. Their claim that Jesus was the Messiah, that Jesus was the Son of God, was a radical one that this Jewish society rejected, and brought disciplinary action against them from the synagogue authorities. It is now widely recognized that this harsh treatment toward 'the jews' in John's gospel do not reflect Jesus' circumstances, but the circumstances of this specific Christian community in the late first century.

So it's important to take note and remember that when John writes 'the jews' it does not refer to the Jewish people as a whole but rather the synagogue authorities in conflict with the early Christian community. Or more broadly, John uses the term 'the jews' to reflect those who did not believe in him.

This question of Jesus as Messiah...it hits right at the heart of the gospel of John, for this specific Christian community. Is Jesus the Messiah? Jesus doesn't say plainly. Only that the works he does in God's name testify to that. But he doesn't seem concerned about proving his messiahship. He just seems to want to protect his sheep.

To that early Christian community, painfully losing their Jewish community over the question of messiahship, the community they were raised in...their family...to know that their shepherd, the one they believed in, protected them in that hurt and pain must have been liberating.

They were harassed and outcasted from their community. But as God's sheep they were also safe within Christ's hand. Unable to be snatched away.

We see these communities still in our world today. Communities that are harassed and outcasted from their society. Over their race, their gender, their sexuality, their citizenship status, their economic status, their disability. The list goes on and on. But these are Christ's sheep. To him they belong. They hear his voice, the voice that Christ's own rejection and crucifixion reflects the pain they bear. They are safe in his hand, unable to be snatched away. For Christ the shepherd is always on the side of those whom are oppressed. Those whom society casts away. And to them he gives liberation and eternal life.

The promise of eternal life is prominent in the gospel of John. And while eternal life certainly means triumph over death, that death is not the end, and life with God continues. Christ gives eternal life to his sheep here and now. Eternal life has to do

with the quality of life we live here and now. We can have a life of abundance in Christ in the present. For Christ gives eternal life. Not will give, but gives.

For John's community, for their beliefs that put them at odds with both the Greco-Roman world and the Jewish synagogue, these beliefs were that Jesus was the Messiah, something that contravened the Jewish understanding of Messiahship, and the Son of God, which was a political affront in view of the Romans' valuation of the emperor as God. To have life eternal being affirmed was a welcoming message for John's group.

For marginalized groups in our society today, being given eternal life here and now means that they do not need to wait to reap their rewards in heaven. They are worthy of an abundant, dignified, and liberated life lived now in the safety of God's hand. Doing God's work means working to make that abundant, liberated life a reality for all.

In this season of Easter, where we sit in resurrection, it is the resurrected Christ that is our good shepherd. We come to know Jesus and learn about his works and teachings in the gospels during his earthy life before crucifixion. But it is the dead, crucified, and resurrected Christ that abides within us, abides in our world today, and gives us eternal life.

And the resurrected Christ bears on him the pain of the world, shown on his resurrected body. The hands that keep us safe are the hands that were nailed to cross. The hands that protect us bear the scars of the violence of humanity.

As I've sat with the resurrected Christ this Easter season, and thought about the resurrected Christ as the good shepherd, I've come to let go of my frustration. My frustration thinking back to those sheep on my friend's farm. Not wanting to be like those sheep.

Because the truth is, Christ as the good shepherd has nothing to do with me being a sheep, and everything to do with Christ as a shepherd. It makes no difference if I am a sheep easily manipulated by the world, because I belong to Christ. I am safe in his hand. A hand that bears the mark of the promise of what Christ took on so that I might have eternal life. That we all might have eternal life, and in Christ's name - in the safety of Christ's resurrected hand - work toward building a world of abundant eternal life. And for that, thanks be to God!