

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
April 22, 2018  
Fourth Sunday of Easter  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 4:23-31  
Psalm 100  
I John 3:1-8  
John 10:11-16

As we find ourselves deeper into the season of Easter, our Gospel lesson today actually takes us back in time to the events that lead to Jesus' crucifixion. So in order to see how this text from John 10 might give us an Easter message, we need to put things into context.

This text about Jesus as the "Good Shepherd" is actually a continuation of the events surrounding Jesus' healing of the man born blind back in chapter 9. This means that circumstances are rather tense. The entire ninth chapter is colored by a growing dispute about *who Jesus is*, where his authority comes from, and whether or not he is truly "of God."

When Jesus says here in our text that he is the Good Shepherd, and contrasts himself with those who are "thieves and robbers," he only *intensifies* the tension rather than alleviate it. And this scene then prepares the way for Jesus' healing of Lazarus, which pushes his opponents to the breaking point as they plot his death.

So while the context around this text pushes us backwards to the events that lead to Jesus' crucifixion, this text can still be a "resurrection" text. But to help us

see that more clearly, we need to include a few verses at the beginning and the end that the lectionary compilers omitted.

First, immediately after the end of our lesson, Jesus says: “My Father loves me because I lay down my life...No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down and power to take it up again.” (vv. 17-18)

Jesus is saying something very important here. It’s more than an assertion that he has the power over life and death. Jesus is making a promise here that as the Good Shepherd, he cares enough for us to die for us, to lay his life down, to give what all other leaders fail to give, and to remain with us through all things until we enter good pastures once again.

This amplifies Jesus’ statement that comes just before the portion that we read this morning. There Jesus says: “The thief comes to steal, to kill, and to destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” (v. 10)

When Jesus says that he comes to provide life to the full, the “abundant” life he is talking about is not a *quantitative* thing. Abundant life is not simply “lots more” of what we already have. Abundant life as Jesus describes it is a *qualitative* thing. It’s a *quality* of life. Abundant life as Jesus describes it here in the context of himself as the Good Shepherd *is a life that is no longer dominated by fear.*

Instead, it is life that is lived through the promise of the Good Shepherd's *protection* and *presence*.

Life no longer dominated and controlled by fear. Think about that for a moment. Think about the many things that we are afraid of as we live our lives, or about what we are afraid of *right now*. It might be a transition in life. Some of us fear the loss of a job. Others fear the death of a loved one, or the end of a relationship. Still others fear the loss of our *abilities* or the loss of *memory*. Others fear the prospect of being alone, and living alone on a fixed income. Some of us fear for our children and grandchildren.

Our fears may change through the years, but the *existence* and *presence* of those fears in our lives does not. And this is true not just of us as individuals, but also as a church and a society. The church across the board in our era is facing declining membership, shrinking budgets, and an aging population.

In our culture many now fear the end of upward mobility. Others fear the increasing polarization in our country around race and socio-economic status. There is an increasing fear of the stranger and immigrant among us. And many fear that America has lost its status in the world.

These fears drive our decisions, influence elections, and weigh on us constantly. In short, *these fears rob us of abundant life*.

And in the midst of those fears we are plunged head first into a Gospel lesson where the One who has defeated death stands in the midst of His people and says to them: “I am the Good Shepherd. I lay down my life for my sheep. The thief comes only to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. But I have come that you might have life, and have it more abundantly.”

Jesus stands in our midst and lovingly reminds us that *he is sovereign over fear, in all its forms*. He does it when he appears in front of disciples behind locked doors and says: *Peace be with you*. He does it when he appears to disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and says: *Peace be with you*. And he does so now to modern day disciples who are plagued by fear when he says: *I am the Good Shepherd. I know my sheep. I care for them with my very life*.

In ancient Palestine, when night came, shepherds would often need to construct makeshift sheepfolds based on the materials they had available to them where they were out in the harsh countryside. They usually looked for rock formations that formed some sort of enclosure, but failing that they often had to take bushes and brush and pile them up in a sort of “U” shape. Then the shepherd would take thorny bushes and pile them on the top of the enclosure to prevent the sheep from trying to jump out, and to make it harder for thieves to jump over the wall to steal them.

Once the enclosure was constructed, the only way in and out of the fold was through a space the shepherd would leave open. Once the sheep were in, the shepherd would literally lie across the opening, becoming the “door” or the “gate” in and out of the sheep fold. Anything coming in or out would have to do so through the shepherd.

On this fourth Sunday of Easter, I need to ask you a very important question today: *What is it in your life right now that is causing you to be afraid?*

In this quiet moment, listen for his voice of reassurance. Let him speak peace into your fear. Come, and exchange your fear for the bread and the wine wherein he comes to you and speaks peace to your troubled heart. Then go in peace, knowing that he is your Shepherd and your loving Lord.

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