

Easter4_YrA_051114_mcr
All Saints Episcopal Church

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

In the name of the Risen Christ. Amen.

Well, today is the fourth Sunday of Easter, and here we are, once again, as we are every year on the fourth Sunday of Easter, hearing something about Jesus and sheep. This day is also known as 'Good Shepherd Sunday,' although it is only in lectionary Year B that Jesus says, in John's gospel, "I am the good shepherd." In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus calls himself the gate, but he means the gate to the sheepfold. So, there you have it.

Right now then, I'm going to bet that some of you might be thinking, "Oh, Lord, are we going to have yet another sermon about dumb, silly sheep? How many times can we hear about sheep? I don't think I'm as dumb as a sheep, and I don't think she knows anything about sheep that she hasn't already told us before!"

Well, relax! This is NOT going to be about sheep, actually. And that is because I learned something in my reading this week that I had not known before - or, if I had known it, I have forgotten it, so as it is all new to me, maybe it will be all new to you, too!

Here it is: there is a structural pattern in John's gospel - a pattern of *sign*, *dialogue* and *discourse* - where Jesus performs a sign, dialogue follows between those who have observed the sign and are trying to figure out what it means, and finally Jesus gives a discourse - an interpretation - of the sign he has performed.

And - here's another thing we probably overlook most of the time when reading the Bible - the chapter and verse divisions of our modern Bibles does not have any resemblance to the original writing of the ones who wrote these books! Duh! There weren't any chapter numbers until the 13th century and no verse numbers until the 16th century. God didn't put the chapters in there. It was those monks sitting at their tables in the scriptorium of the monastery! So when we see one chapter end

and a new one begin, we can't assume that the first idea is also finished and a new one is being started. Such is the case with our lesson today.

Think back for a moment to the fourth Sunday in Lent this year, way back to March 30, way back to the beginning of the 9th chapter of John. It is the story of Jesus and the man who had been born blind - when Jesus spits in the dirt and makes mud, which he puts on the man's eyes and tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. The man washes and is able to see for the first time in his life. This is the sign.

But the Pharisees don't believe it really happened, and they question his parents about the truth of his story. It is also the Sabbath day when Jesus heals the man, and the Pharisees are mad about that. The parents tell the Pharisees to go ask their son all their questions, so they go ask them for the second time. This time, the man praises Jesus and calls him a prophet. The Pharisees are so upset by all this that they drive him out.

Jesus comes to find the man when he hears that the Pharisees have driven him out, and asks him if he believes in the Son of Man? The man asks who that person is, and Jesus says that he is the one. The man says, "Lord, I believe," and worships him. This is the dialogue.

Then the discourse, or interpretation, begins, and our particular verses of the Gospel for today follow shortly thereafter. Jesus introduces a cast of characters such as sheep, shepherd, thieves, bandits, gatekeeper, strangers and even the gate. He also sets up the imagery that he will use throughout this discourse - covert entrance into the sheepfold, knowing the voice of another, being someone's own and having your name called.

The rest of today's reading contains the image of Jesus as the gate - or door in some translations. And the verses beyond our lesson conclude with the verses about Jesus as the good shepherd and the one who knows his sheep and is known by his sheep. The discourse ends at chapter 10, verse 18.

What does all this mean? It means that all this good shepherd stuff has to do with the story of the man born blind. It means that we cannot look at the sayings about sheep and shepherds without putting them in the context of the blind man's story. And that is good news! Because at the end of today's passage, Jesus' words are, "I

came that they may have life, and have it abundantly," and that is the very heart of the Gospel!

In contrast to all those things that might rob us of life - thieves, bandits and strangers - Jesus comes to give, not just life, but life in abundance. Not just survival, but flourishing; not just getting by, but thriving; not just existence, but joy. The heart of the Gospel is the resurrection promise of life and possibility and potential.

For the man born blind, abundant life is sight. It is release from dependence, isolation and marginalization. It is the promise of light, of security, of freedom and new opportunity.

If abundant life is those things for the blind man, what does it mean for others? It surely looks different to different people and in different places. For a single parent, abundant life might look like companionship and reliable help with the kids. For a bullied teen, it might look like acceptance and someone who is not only a friend, but an advocate as well. For an impoverished neighborhood, it might look like the chance for renewal with self-determination. For almost the entire continent of Africa, it might mean the ability to provide electricity for all people.

Whatever it looks like, abundant life always shows itself as a release from whatever might try to rob us - as God's children - of our inheritance of life, purpose and joy.

And this abundant life is not off somewhere in the future - it is for us in the here and now. The blind man didn't have to go off to heaven to regain his sight, he just did what Jesus told him to do. Go, wash. It is not a goal we strive for; we realize this abundance when we follow Jesus.

Yeah, I know, following Jesus means doing the same old stuff - caring for the hungry, the sick, the poor, those who are marginalized - the same old stuff that we talk about week after week after week. But that's why we're here in this place - because we know somehow that this gift of abundant life is not one we have earned or one that we deserve - it is a gift - a free gift - with no strings attached.

So we're here to say, "Wow! Thanks, God!"

And, because this gift is Good News, we should share it. When something brings us joy, we want to share it. When we are loved, we want to share it. When we are not afraid, we want to share it.

So let's share this Good News. Let's share this abundant life. Don't be afraid that if we share it, someone will take it away from us. We won't have less of it if we share it. It will, instead, grow exponentially. There is nothing to fear.

I have recently discovered a preacher/theologian/pastor who cuts to the chase when she is speaking of God. Her name is Nadia Bolz Weber. Here is her summary of what we are about - her summary of the Word:

"That there is a God who created us and all that is, this same God spoke through prophets and poets, claimed a people to be God's own and freed them from the shackles of slavery. This same God led those people through the wilderness to a land of milk and honey, and told them to always welcome the stranger and protect the foreigner so that they could remember where they came from and what God had done for them. Then in the fullness of time, and to draw ALL people to himself, God came and broke our hearts like only a baby could do and made God's home in the womb of a fierce young woman as though God was saying, from now on this is how I want to be known. And as Jesus, God the Son kissed lepers and befriended prostitutes and baffled authority. Jesus ate with all the wrong people and on the night before he died, he gathered with his faltering friends for a meal that tasted of freedom. He held up bread and told us to do the same thing and he promised us so much: that he would be with us, that forgiveness is real, that we are God's, that people matter and that death is done for and that after a tough resurrection, grilled fish makes an awesome breakfast." (Nadia Bolz Weber, a sermon for the Rocky Mountain Synod Assembly)

Wow! Thanks, God!