

Easter IV Year C 2019

A figure of speech: according to the dictionary, is a non-literal expression in language; a metaphor that points to a deeper truth....a metaphor from everyday life that points to truth or reality in the language of the imagination.... Samuel Taylor Coleridge called the articulated imagination the language of the Holy Spirit. I would venture to say that there is no knowledge, no experience of the truth without the engaged imagination...that is why the writer or writers of this strange and enigmatic gospel chose the poetic language of metaphor to get at the reality of Jesus.

So our metaphor in John's gospel today is shepherding.....and, just so you know, I don't know much about shepherding.... In fact, I know nothing of shepherding, or sheep for that matter...there was no course on shepherding in Seminary....now, lamb I know about, if we're talking about lamb chops or leg of lamb....so we'll do the best we can with the images we are given in our gospel reading; perhaps there is something in this for us.

The Gospel of John is often called the "I am" gospel, because throughout the narrative Jesus makes 'I am' statements about his identity (45 times if you're counting), these 'I am' statements of course would remind the Jewish hearer of Yahweh's own 'I am' proclamation to Moses in the

Sinai desert (I am who I am; God says to Moses), so this is about identity... In the Gospel of John Jesus refers to himself as light; as a grape vine;...I am bread and wine, he says; I am food; I am living water.... I am resurrection; I am truth; I am the way; I am the door; I am life.... all of these figures of speech, of course...The language of the Spirit, the imagination, is to be heard as if listening to a poem, and the speculative possibilities a poem presents....So let's take a closer look at our text today...perhaps we may get a glimpse at what this ancient metaphorical language of the Spirit is saying to us.

For centuries interpreters of scripture, intrepid scholars have traveled the labyrinthine archives of historical, and anthropological data about shepherding: gleaned knowledge about the day to day grind of being a shepherd, and of being sheep: shepherds being a marginalized cast of society; at a dangerous job, always on the move; not much pay, but a formidable responsibility....and then sheep: prone to getting lost, not very intelligent; stubborn; not very agile....In just about every case said interpreter would invariably associate these mediocre denizens of the animal kingdom with us....we the flock: not very intelligent; getting lost a lot; stubborn; accident prone; easy prey; we the flock in need of a smart, brave and loving shepherd who knows our very name....What a hey-day for the

puritans and Calvinists who would call the world fallen and depraved; what a hey-day for the church that in its zeal for control would keep us sinful flock in our rightful place....the rightful place being 'lostness'... a flock of sinners in dire need of salvation....You've heard the sermons about Jesus the Good Shepherd...you've seen the ubiquitous pictures of the Anglicized Jesus carrying a lamb to safety... We the bumbling sheep in need....We've inherited that interpretation of this passage over the ages....So let's take another look and see if there is more, because this language of metaphor can be slippery, in a good way; it can go in surprising directions. But the writer does, after all, have a thematic agenda to which we must pay attention... and to call the people who follow Christ lost, like sheep, just doesn't square with John's theology. Remember Jesus tells his disciples that they are sent as he is sent; that they will do greater works than he. John argues that the light of the world, and the light of humankind is from the same source; from God; and John goes so far as to suggest that the people who follow Jesus are of the same stature as the Christ... And though I don't think we've ever quite believed that, we can't discount that premise in reading this Gospel.

So in a few lines before our reading for today John gives us the image of the door... Jesus says 'I am' the door.... an open door of potential, of invitation, of welcome. Then follows the image of the shepherd, and with all

due respect for and thanks to the scholars who have studied the art of shepherding, I think the writer has something more in mind than Jesus the shepherd and the rest of us the lost sheep.... So let's rely on our old friend, typology.... Images from Hebrew scripture that the New Testament writers are applying to their present situation: These are the words of the prophet Ezekiel in the 34th chapter, written centuries before the Gospel of John: "Thus saith the lord: Prophets get to say that...thus saith the Lord: "Ah you bad shepherds of Israel feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed their sheep? You eat the fat, clothe yourself in wool, slaughter the fatlings....but you do not feed the sheep!" He's really worked up here.

He continues... " You have not strengthened the weak....you have not healed the sick...you have not welcomed the widow and the stranger...you have not bound up the injured....you have not brought back the strayed....because of your harshness you have scattered them....For thus says the Lord God, I myself will be their shepherd, and will seek them out and save them from all the places to which they have been scattered. I am the good shepherd. You are my sheep says the Lord." It is clear to me that the writer of John surely has Ezekiel in mind. So Jesus is not just the 'good shepherd'... he is not the bad shepherd. Y'all see what I mean? He is the

Good Shepherd as opposed to the bad shepherds of Israel who have served themselves at the expense of others.

I am the open door; I am the good Shepherd: two rich metaphors with an intimate relationship between them..... So you remember the key to reading John's Gospel, right?.... Here's the key: that when Jesus says "I am"...then we are to hear "we are." Jesus, for John, is the standard bearer of the people of faith. He is us in short. He is the church living into her potential.... We are not, dear people of God, second generation, watered down Christians apart from the Christ... we are the living Christ in our world...the first generation...dare we muster the courage to believe that?...this gospel is the imaginative witness to our very identity.....a witness to our true nature, a witness to the potential of our humanity; a treatise to our God-likeness, not our lost-ness. The church over the centuries has been fluent in its speaking of our depravity; and mute when it comes to speaking of our God-likeness.

So we the risen Christ, the people of faith, are the door....we are the bridge from hunger and starvation into the abundance God intends for all...we dare not be the closed door of prejudice and exclusivity....but we are the open door to the outcast, the open door to the weak and the lost, the scattered; the widow and the stranger, we the open door of hospitality....we

must not be the closed door of violence and injustice and intolerance...but we the open door to peace and justice and mercy and compassion....we my brothers and sisters are the door for those outside these walls....we are the door of invitation to the marginalized, God's wounded flock, into the feast, into good pasture, into life itself...the life of God's reign in earth....we are the doorway so near, so proximate to the lost among us.

And we are the good shepherd, people.... Not bad shepherds, as Ezekiel puts it; not bad shepherds whose god is self-interest.... I am a card carrying member of Alcoholics anonymous, a community that seeks to overcome addiction; and I have learned that addiction, among other things, is the pathological obsession with the self.... Hyper self-interest, as it were. I believe we live in an addicted culture, a culture obsessed with itself.... And the way out of addiction is to give oneself over to the good of the other; that our salvation is found in being the means of salvation for our brother, for our sister who suffers.

To be the door, the bridge...the agents of change in our world, we must be good shepherds....we must be people who live not for ourselves but live with all due passion for our world that God loves..... We are to lay down our lives for the good of it, as the writer of John's Gospel puts it..... maybe for us the Good Shepherd is a symbol of our power and privilege...

power and privilege that must be laid down for the good of the lost and the weak. “I am the good shepherd, the sheep know my voice”....We are the good shepherd, gifted with hard and dangerous work... We are the Good Shepherd; the sheep know our voice.....the hurt of our world knows the voice of compassion and mercy....The marginalized...the sheep of God’s pasture, know the voice of saving justice....the victims of violence know the voice of peace.....the sick know the voice of healing... the immigrant knows the voice of welcome; the prisoner knows the voice of freedom.....They wait for the voice and It is high time we claim our public voice of advocacy; because the lost sheep of our world, harried by the wolves of injustice languish, waiting for a word... a saving word that would prevent them from being snatched by the hand of evil from the abundant life offered by our loving God..

Jesus said I am the door....Jesus said I am the good shepherd....So let us understand this figure of speech....We are the Good Shepherd....we are the door....The church has for far too long now struggled with its own relevancy....The church was never meant to be an escape from the world’s rigor. The church is God’s gift to the world. This gospel is telling us that not only are we relevant for the world’s salvation, but vital..... We are the door, we are the good shepherd, we are resurrection and life, we are the vine, we

are living water, we are bread, we are wine, holy food for the world; we are

Love come from heaven... sisters and brothers, be the figure of speech...

live it in the flesh.