

Pastor Gail Duba

John 10:22-30

Easter 4C **Hearing the Voice of the Good Shepherd on MotherEarth Day** 5/5/22

Happy Mother's Day to all women of the Congregation, because everyone has a Mother! In today's readings we are presented several times with the familiar shepherd motif. The text from Revelation declares that the "lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd" and the gospel reading is about belonging to God, as sheep belong to a shepherd. Perhaps nowhere is this metaphor more poignantly presented than in beloved Psalm 23, which assures us that God the shepherd guides, leads and restores us, even in the darkest of times.

The Bible often refers to political and religious leaders as shepherds. In the Old Testament in particular, bad leaders are portrayed as bad shepherds, while God and the future Messiah are described as good shepherds. Furthermore, it is the *voice* of these shepherds that lets people know their trustworthiness. Jesus tells us that his sheep will listen to and know his voice, not that of the hired hand. Just before today's reading in the book of John, Jesus explains to a group of Pharisees that, "the sheep follow him [the Good Shepherd] because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Whose voice is so familiar that you trust it unconditionally? And what is that voice telling you?

Today it is perhaps harder than ever to distinguish between voices of the good & the bad shepherds, simply due to the large number of loud, public voices competing for our attention & our loyalty. Furthermore, these voices that attempt to shepherd us through confusing paths often contradict one another. It can indeed be quite challenging to discern the voice of a trusted guide out of a cacophony of facts, speculations, opinions and falsehoods that bombard our ears every day. Some voices employ the tried and true tactic of taking unpleasant or threatening truths and casting them into the realm of doubt or uncertainty. When the jury still seems to be out, we can go with business as usual rather than confronting harsh realities & enacting some changes.

But there is yet another voice to consider here. This voice is constantly speaking but seldom heard. It is the voice of the earth & it is groaning. Romans 8:22 states that "all Creation is groaning" alongside ourselves. April 22, was Earth Day—the 52nd Earth Day since its beginning in 1970. On that day we honored creation & recognized its groaning. In one sense it is strange that we devote just a single day per year to reflect upon our home – the tapestry of life that allows us to breathe, eat & function. One day only to praise & marvel at the unfathomable complexity & splendor of life on this earth, and one day only to mourn and repent what we now recognize as the large-scale deterioration of every single ecosystem that supports life on this earth, while the other 364 days of the year we condone business as usual in un-creating these complex life systems that God has placed on this earth. We do indeed walk through a valley in the shadow of death.

The created world is a revelation of God's power and gracious presence, a table that God has prepared before us. It is green pastures & still waters, but it is also a finely tuned atmosphere and complex network of biodiversity; it is interrelated earth and ocean systems that allow life to flourish. This sacred quality of creation demands sharing and moderation, antidotes for our excessive consumption and waste that end up harming the poor most of all. Rich people and countries contribute most to changes in Earth's climate, resulting in catastrophic events like droughts and superstorms, whose victims are the poorest and most vulnerable, largely in Africa and parts of Asia.

Serving as a good steward of creation means accepting these painful truths, hearing the groaning voices. In the gospel reading today, Jesus says, "I have told you and you do not believe." Perhaps he was exasperated as he said this, much as today's many climate scientists, scholars, community and faith leaders are with us. "I have told you – and you do not believe."

We are called, not just to believe, not just to honor creation and hear its groaning, but to act in response. A humorous headline from the satirical newspaper *The Onion* reads, "How Bad for the Environment Can Throwing Away One Plastic Bottle Be?' 30 Million People Wonder." This tongue-in-cheek jab draws attention to a sentiment that surely many of us feel: I am only one person – what difference can I make? But the truth is that we are never just one, we are never alone. And we *must* act, alongside our brothers and sisters and church community, because God calls us to be engaged, fruitful & protective stewards on this earth.

Where do we begin to act in the face of a seemingly insurmountable crisis? Can we see ourselves in the position of those in Revelation, who will hear the elders explaining that "these are the ones who have come out of the great ordeal"?

The reading from Acts offers guidance. In this reading, Peter is summoned to a seemingly insurmountable crisis situation: In the town of Joppa, Tabatha, a devoted disciple, has just died. In what unfolds next, we find meaningful direction on taking action, whether we identify as Peter or as Tabatha. First Peter knelt down and prayed. Fruitful, grounded action begins with prayer. Next, Peter told Tabatha to "get up." Some of us are equipped to call people to awake from a proverbial deathbed and get going. Others need to have ears to hear the voice of Peter and "open our eyes."

Then Peter "gave her his hand and helped her up." Both giving and accepting encouragement are crucial in a long and difficult process of reawakening and enacting change. Finally, Peter "showed her to be alive," demonstrating to all who were gathered there the good work that had occurred.

And so, as we reflect this day on God's creation around us and the work that lies before us, we know that in this task we are not alone. We know that God walks with us, that the incarnate Christ joins the earth in groaning, and that there is a way out of this dark valley if we can allow ourselves to be led by the trustworthy voice of the Good Shepherd.

Many who first heard Jesus' claims to be one with God demanded evidence, signs that would demonstrate the truth of what he said. They wanted proof. Jesus gave them an answer when declared, "I am the Good Shepherd; I know my own, and my own know me...and I lay down my life for the sheep... No one takes it from me; but I lay it down of my own accord, and I have power to take it up again." The proof that Jesus gives that he is the Good Shepherd is his loving self-sacrifice for the people of God and the power of his resurrection. Put another way, Good Friday and Easter Morning are the proof that Jesus of Nazareth is who he says he is. On this Good Shepherd Sunday, we ought to celebrate God's great love as it is revealed in Jesus Christ's total gift of himself on our behalf. He is the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep and took it up again, and it is he who has given us the abundance of eternal life. As Christians we receive this gift as we hear Jesus' voice calling us each by name and as we trust him with our whole life in the knowledge that, commended to the Savior's keeping, we shall never be ripped away from God's love.

May we be equipped to distinguish and heed this voice, one that guides, cajoles, urges us to follow the paths of goodness and mercy. May we recognize & acknowledge the goodness of the earth's complex, beautiful & natural systems & feel mercy for those who suffer disproportionately from the effects of environmental & ecosystem degradation. And may we have ears to hear the voice of the earth, one that has been speaking all along and desperately needs our attention.

But there is hope to be sure. Hope in the form of wind generators, solar panels, tree planting, carbon sequestration, & forest management practices that meet the needs of both timber production & stewardship. We remember from Genesis 1, God created the world & all that is here. We are the Earth's caretakers, God's stewards—we marvel in God's Creation's diversity & pray we will serve with caring compassion & justice. On this Good Shepherd Sunday & Mother's Day, we ought to celebrate God's great love as it is revealed in Jesus Christ's total gift of himself on our behalf. He is the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep and took it up again, and it is he who has given us the abundance of eternal life. As Christians we receive this gift as we hear Jesus' voice calling us each by name and as we trust him with our whole life in the knowledge that commended to the Savior's keeping we shall never be ripped away from God's love. Amen.

