

Sermon
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 21st, 2024
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott
Readings: ACTS 4:5-12; PSALM 23; 1 JOHN 3:16-24; JOHN 10:11-18

In his book “In The Shelter: Finding a Home in the World”, Irish poet and theologian Padraig O’Tuama explores ideas of shelter, welcome, and home. If you’ve not read it, I commend it to you. This book is not about shelter or home as a destination or location. It is about finding peace, and rest, right where we are. It’s about finding connection, and belonging, and a feeling of home and sanctuary wherever we are.

For the first three Sundays after Easter, the lectionary offers us Resurrection stories: Jesus appearing among the disciples. These stories are mysterious. They inspire wonder, amazement, and astonishment.

Today, and the next three Sundays, our scripture moves from that wonder and amazement to exploration of Jesus’s teaching about living, and about the way to connection and relationship with God and with each other. These teachings in this Easter season are invitation to consider how we live, fully, and abundantly. They are an invitation to consider how we find home and sanctuary wherever we are.

We're offered the metaphor and imagery of sheep and shepherd every year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter. This Sunday is often called "Good Shepherd Sunday", and this year we hear Jesus say "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

At nighttime, shepherds, in ancient Israel, would have led their sheep to a sheepfold that was an enclosure of loosely stacked stones. The shepherd would lie down at the opening, meaning that a predator would have to climb over him to get to the sheep. In the morning, sheep and shepherd would be on the move again, the sheep knowing the shepherd's voice, and the shepherd leading and guiding.

Annabel and I saw evidence of this last year on our pilgrimage: sheep and shepherd by the highway. No sign of beautifully fenced in fields of green, no outbuildings or barns to return to at night, but rather groupings of stones, enclosures on the rocky hillsides.

The Good Shepherd does lay down his life for the sheep. The Good Shepherd loves the sheep and leads and protects them. What good is it though if the shepherd dies? What good is it if the shepherd intervenes when a wolf attacks? It might buy the sheep a bit more time, but won't the wolf come for them next? John had more than this in mind with this imagery and metaphor...

We started at verse 11 this morning, but it helps to include verse 10b: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd..." The goal of the good shepherd's work is to give the sheep abundant life.

Many a sermon has wrestled with this imagery of sheep and shepherd – much ink has been spilled seeking to explain what John had in mind in offering these images. Unfortunately, it has often become about who is included in the sheepfold and who isn't. Who can hear the shepherd's voice and who can't.

Diana Butler Bass writes about how far our current understanding of words like "faith" and "believe" have strayed from their original meanings, pointing out that the etymology of "faith" relates to fidelity, and personal loyalty. Believe comes from the Old English "belieben", meaning "loving". She suggests that somewhere along the way Christians moved from faith and belief being about the

way a community lived, to faith and belief being about adherence to a set of ideas about Jesus, with agreement with certain statements about Jesus determining who belonged and who didn't...who was in and out of the fold.

No one is excluded from God's love. The shepherd isn't offered as a figure speaking only to a chosen few, but as a *trusted* figure. Not as a figure whose voice can only be heard by some, but as one who loves unconditionally. A figure who will go down into the valley of death for us, with us. Who will come and find us even if we've made mistakes that have left us stranded on the cliff's edge, caught in dense brush, lost in a dark cave. Who will come and find us even when addictions take hold. Who is with us even when we've made a mess of our lives. Even when we don't feel loved, and don't – or can't – show love to others. It's not a test to see if we'll recognize the voice that makes us an insider instead of an outsider.

Quaker mystic Thomas Kelly said this:

“Deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Center, a speaking Voice, to which we may continually return. Eternity is at our hearts, pressing upon our time-torn lives, warming us with intimations of an astounding destiny, calling us home unto Itself.”

Calling us home unto itself. Jesus was always at home in God's presence. He drew those around him into that presence, and he draws us into it, too. This is the "sheepfold", the "enclosure" that Jesus invites us into in our lives. An enclosure of unconditional love. An enclosure of presence, and connection with God.

Jesus did lay down his life, but this laying down was never going to be the end! I have suggested before that John's Gospel is like the swing of a pendulum. There is a profound sense of movement in how John's Gospel unfolds. Jesus lays down his life, but it was never going to be the end of the story. Jesus lays down his life for the Resurrection to be. Jesus rises from the tomb so that he can ascend, and he ascends to "draw all people" into God's love, and into abundant life. The pendulum never stops though! The "upswing" of Jesus's ascension returns, bringing the gift of the Holy Spirit so that the story of God's love continues.

That pendulum swings for the whole of our lives – for all eternity. It swings, drawing in, inviting into shelter, into a feeling of home, into belovedness, again and again.

Last year, on our pilgrimage, Annabel and I saw sheep and shepherds navigating rocky hillsides right on the side of the highway with traffic flying by, right next to

them. How often do our lives feel like a rocky hillside with potential dangers whipping by, left and right? Jesus says to us, I am with you, in all of that! The Spirit is with you, in all things. God is with you, inviting you to be enfolded in love as you navigate the rocky terrain of being human, and the rugged hillsides of this life's journey.

Why is there this enfolding? What is it for? I have always appreciated Richard Rohr's commentary in this regard. He says:

“We can't start a spiritual journey on a negative foundation. If we just seek God out of fear or guilt or shame we won't go very far. If we start negative, we stay negative.”

I'd add that we can't live fully, abundantly, as the Gospel of John tells us is the point of Jesus's laying down of his life – we can't live fully from a negative starting point, or if the “enclosure” we return to again and again is negative. We can't see and be God's love in the world from a place of negativity.

We gather to worship to be reminded that the “enclosure”, the “sheepfold” we are invited into in and through Jesus is one of love. There is an “enfolding” that happens here on a Sunday morning, and whenever we gather. There is an invitation into the sheepfold of God’s unconditional, eternal love in our liturgy and sacraments. Feel it this morning. Be enfolded and held in God’s love. Sing it. Pray it. Taste it in bread and wine. Be reminded that this “enclosure” of loving presence is there, anywhere, and everywhere for you. You are loved. Go forth from that “enfolding” – from a place of love and positivity – with fresh resolve to see and be God’s love in the world, today and every day. In Jesus name. Amen.