

Acts 4: 1-12 English Standard Version Peter and John Before the Council

4 And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, ² greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. ³ And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. ⁴ But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.

⁵ On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, ⁶ with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷ And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" ⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "**Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹ if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. ¹¹ This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. ¹² And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.**"

1 John 3:16-24 English Standard Version

¹⁶ **By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us,** and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷ But **if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.** ¹⁹ By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; ²⁰ for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. ²¹ Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; ²² and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. ²³ And **this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.** ²⁴ Whoever keeps his

commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.

John 10:11-18 English Standard Version

¹¹ I am the good shepherd. **The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.** ¹² He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ **I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,** ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ **And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.** ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. **I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."**

Sermon. The good shepherd. Here in Maine we have an image of sheep hanging around well watered, green pastures, or, perhaps commuting in and out of a barn with well fenced pastures and plenty of food. Rarely do we see a shepherd with them. Not so in Canaan. Sheep were and are relegated to the arid foothills where there is little water and little food. The sheep are always on the move looking for new grass – and the shepherds lead them, calling to them and the sheep keep pace. They know their shepherd and know that they are being led well. This was the life of David before Samuel anointed him and it is the life of countless Bedouins today.

Psalm 23 is a direct lift from the imagery of that life. Each line of the psalm is describes what the people would have known of the faithfulness of the shepherd and the dependence of the flock on him or her. As the people of Dubai found out this week, desert storms can be hard and water may come in torrents that can sweep sheep away. So, green pastures, still waters and a sense of well being due to the shepherd is very real.

This week we went up into the Eastern Townships and drove past the very deep gorge at Coaticook. The pedestrian bridge there is the longest in North

America and, at 150 feet above the river, as my sister will attest, can be somewhat scary. As we drove past on Thursday we saw what looked like a father and daughter crossing that bridge. I suspect that many of us would not linger to sightsee on that bridge. But, the dad was showing the daughter the view and they seemed oblivious to the distance to the bottom. We didn't get out and interview them, but I suspect that the calmness of the father gave a sense of safety and well being to the daughter and they seemed happy to be gazing out over the railings. A mashup of faith, steadfastness, and constancy all captured in a moment. Life is usually not that dramatic, but we are surrounded by similar daily events where we, by knowledge, rely on others.



Years ago my ship made a visit to a small Dutch port. The town invited the crew to a party and I went with a group of perhaps 100 sailors to the event. There were lots of townspeople there mingling with the sailors, with plenty of refreshments and the noise level of the happy voices kept increasing. I was speaking with the mayor when he decided that he wanted to address the crowd, which at that point seemed to be its own living being. But, I called to the sailors for attention and the room went silent so quickly that the mayor was stunned. I expect he figured that it would take some time to quiet the group. In truth, I was surprised also. But, that is the point. The sailors knew that if they heard my voice that it meant something and they were tuned to listen. It would not have worked with the mayor's voice, or even one of the sailor's. But, at that point we had

spent a very long time in relationship and the crew knew that I would not call to them without an immediate purpose.

That is the point of the psalm and the Gospel for today. We are led by God in our lives. Like the sheep – and, in fact, the sailors – not every moment is carefree. Our lives, like that of the sheep, are full of good and bad, hard and easy. God is our Shepherd. Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd – that of Psalm 23. And, just as in the psalm, if we have faith and rely on our Shepherd, he will take us through the dangerous times.

There are a couple of other major points in the texts. First, Jesus tells the disciples that they are not the only ones. The inference, as I read it, is clearly that the people of Israel are not the only people called by God – that there are many many others. Like us. I think that this becomes foreshadowing of Jesus' later charge to the disciples to go throughout the world to share the Gospel.

Second, we have Peter's challenge to the leaders he responds to after the healing of a man in Jerusalem. His is a statement that this miracle was not of them, but of Jesus. The Good Shepherd. The One through Him is life, though they have rejected Him.

Finally, we have the epistle writer making it very clear. I have the impression that in contemporary American Protestantism there is an overriding question of personal salvation. The question of where you will be if today is the end. You've seen the signs about that along the roadside. John is making the pastoral point that life in Christ is not an end times question, nor is it an intellectual one. It is, rather, something very immediate. In this life right here. We are to testify of God not only in our words, but in what we do. Who we are. And it is not just in whether we engage in specific activities, but, rather, in what we do day in, day out, in the everyday – the French have a word for it – *quotidien* – perhaps mundane – course of our lives. John is repeating the commandment that Jesus gave the disciples – that they are to love each other, just as they have been and are loved. That means – I believe – that we don't even need to think about it – that our routine, first nature is to act in love toward each other.

And that is the hard part, eh? At any given moment we are immensely unlovable people. Each of us. So, what's to do? Well, the easy part is this: we love each other because we are each God's Creation. We love each other because of the piece of God we see in the other person – or even if that piece is, to us, very hard to discern. We love each other because it is all within God's Creational plan. Just as the people of Israel could not survive and prosper outside of the Creational plan – thus the Exodus lesson of community – so it is for us. If we fail to live in community, which, by definition, must be based on God's love, then we are just a bunch of individuals bent on our own personal goals and not those of Creation. Our daily challenge is how we integrate the lessons of today's texts with the personal goals we establish for a myriad of things.



Now, we can't do any of this on our own. There are too many voices, too many seductions, too many things of all sorts that focus us everywhere except on the lessons of the texts. The love of God and what He calls us to. As we've said before, few people wake in the morning with the compelling urge to do evil – though that is, in my view, a distressing reality, however small. No, it really depends on whether we are like Nipper, the RCA Victor dog, focused on his master's voice. We live in God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, by the guidance of Scripture alone, so that each day we may live our lives giving all glory to God alone.

Solideogloria. Amen.