

Easter 4C
May 8, 2022

St. Barnabas Bainbridge

Acts 9.36-43
Ps 23
Revelation 7.9-17
John 10.22-30

Well, good morning, St. Barnabas! It's such an honor to be with you for some of these sabbatical weeks and I am grateful to Karen+ for the invitation. On this Good Shepherd Sunday, I am reminded of an analogy a preacher once made. We could argue about these distinctions, but for the sake of this morning, let's suppose that if God/Jesus is the shepherd, and the people are the sheep, then who/what are the clergy? He proposed we are the sheep dogs, nipping at the heels of the flock to keep them gathered and safe and moving along. On the first Sunday of yours and Karen's sabbatical, I thought that a pretty apt analogy. Karen+, certainly with the help of many others, has spent the last two years holding the flock together in a pandemic, learning new ways to call to the flock, taking precautions to keep it safe and attending to the lost, or in this case, the most isolated. So congratulations to all for a break well-deserved and ongoing prayers for these months of discovery of your own sheep-fold here on Bainbridge. ☺

We are well into the Great 50 Days of Easter now which will take us all the way to the Day of Pentecost. The lessons in this season don't include something from the Old Testament, aside from the psalm, so the first reading is from the Book of Acts and how author Luke continues to tell the story of the disciples and their ministries. We hear about the first martyrs and the power of their belief in the resurrection.

That reminds me of a quote from Karl Barth, a Swiss theologian, certainly one of the densest of all the theologians I ever tried, and failed, to successfully read and understand. Here's a little something he wrote about the resurrection in his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans:

The Resurrection is the emergence of the necessity of giving glory to God: the reckoning with what is unknown and unobservable in Jesus, the recognition of Him as Paradox, Victor and Primal History.

We could probably spend some time with that one and parse it out to make more sense, but just about everything in what is called his opus of 13 books titled *Dogmatics* can make your heart hurt. But one quote often used goes something like this:

“Sermons should be written with the Bible in one hand and the “New York Times” in the other.”

That makes sense to me. Make sermons relevant by connecting what is happening around us to the scriptures chosen for the day. Some examples from the news:

In the past week or so we learned about a candidate for Congress from Oklahoma calling for Dr. Anthony Fauci to be executed by a firing squad; to the cheers of others in his political party. This was not disguised as a joke or overstatement.

There is a war in Ukraine over land and resources by a country whose leader is willing to demolish and slaughter that which is in his way.

There is the “draft” of a Supreme Court ruling to overturn 50 years of abortion rights with some of the population who are terrified of the potential ramifications and others who think it’s the best thing that could happen in our country. Oh, with the Louisiana state legislature wanting to classify abortion as homicide.

And a statue of a Native American ballerina in Oklahoma was chopped into pieces and sold for scrap for \$250. What a week. Every week.

I think these are pretty preachable in this present moment of fear, impatience, hate and rejection of that which doesn’t satisfy us, and anything that inconveniences us or challenges us.

And how do we “plainly” use the stories to clarify these particular lessons today? I was reminded of an NPR story some years back about the so-called [“Trust Hormone.”](#) That’s a pretty “plain” connection to today’s scriptures which lean heavily on trust:

trust in Peter to continue Jesus’ work of healing and that his prophetic ministry did not end when he died;

trust that women like Dorcas will be devoted to good works and acts of charity in Christ’s name;

trust in the nature of God as shepherd who is with us in the dark times and in the presence of evil and enemies;

trust that after coming through the Ordeal, there will be no more hunger or thirst or tears;

trust that we can hear the voice of the shepherd.

The article on this “trust hormone” included an inquiry as to why people distrust government. Now we may not need anyone to tell us plainly why that is, but it was determined that an undersupply of oxytocin, the hormone which among other things makes the uterus contract after childbirth, may play a role. When oxytocin was squirted up the nose of volunteers, they became more willing to give money to strangers and not so convinced that the government was out to get them. Christians, or any people with firm spiritual or religious beliefs, may be living with a bit more oxytocin in our systems because believing in things seen and unseen is an intersection of faith and trust.

Mary Schertz once wrote in *Christian Century* that the pastoral scene in the 23rd psalm, lying in green pastures, wandering beside quiet placid lakes and having a need for nothing, begins to look more like radical trust than blind obedience when we realize that there is a darker side to this

beloved psalm. She writes that it appears to be a bucolic scene, until we also notice that the paths of righteousness could mean the ways of justice.

Or that it talks about walking fearlessly through valleys that are like night, filled with deep shadows. Or that we notice the table spread with abundant food is also surrounded by enemies. These simple sheep get a little more complicated and trust in the shepherd becomes absolutely essential.

All tangled up in trust and faith and belief is the confidence that as the sheep of this shepherd we will be able to hear his voice. Just like the Jews, we would like to hear it plainly, in our own languages, if you please. Apparently it's not necessarily going to come in English or Aramaic or any other spoken language and Jesus isn't interested in handing those gathered around him any more details. He's already told them and they don't believe based on the works he does, either. Hearing the voice of our shepherd is not always going to be plain.

We live in a world filled with competing voices: buy me, eat me, win me, drive me, wear me. How can we sort out the voice of the Lord and know that it's true? How can we be sure we're not hearing the enemy or that crafty deceitful voice in our heads? What if the voice of the shepherd is the still, small voice of the wind in Puget Sound or the quiet of a labyrinth?

The Rev. Ken Kesselus has written that we Christians must keep our ears tuned to the voice of Jesus, calling out in the midst of those other voices. The challenge is to learn to listen for that voice, putting forward the time and attention to hear when he calls.

That reminds me of our son Andrew's 4th grade class when we moved into a new house mid school year. It was an "open" school with no interior walls or divisions other than some furniture between classrooms. They were located around a central administrative area and library and each class was contiguous and continuous with each other. I thought: How on earth do the students hear the teachers with the other students and teachers right beside them?

Interestingly, they had to do it by becoming more quiet. If one teacher had begun to raise a voice to get their students' attention, it would have avalanched. The teachers spoke in normal voices and the children learned to pay attention and listen. They developed the ability to recognize and sort out that voice from the background, like those visual tests where you have to identify numbers or letters against a contrasting visual field.

If we belong to this shepherd as his sheep and trust that we cannot be snatched away from his hand, our spiritual work is to learn to listen for that voice and identify it out of the chaos of noise that fills our lives, internal and external. We do that by quieting, not by yelling louder so that the shepherd will speak up! Barbara Brown Taylor has written that if some days you have trouble hearing the voice of your shepherd, be patient with yourself because some days it sounds like a whistle and some days like a cluck; some days like still waters and some days like a curse.

Some days we may feel low on that trust hormone and others that our cup runneth over. So we stick with the flock. Because it is through the flock, the other listeners, that we learn to sort of the shepherd's voice and identify those paths of righteousness, also known as a mission of St. Barnabas Episcopal Church on Bainbridge Island.

Jesus' voice invites and welcomes and offers us a life that is gathered around the throne of God where trouble and danger are not absent, but where all is finally made new. Erik Heen writes that this Christ will guide the weary to the healing waters of life, waters experienced already in the sacrament of baptism, and be nourished by food that satisfies the hungry heart.

Also in news this week: Texas scientists have [created a protein](#) that breaks down plastic bottles; a 12 year old boy in England made [one wooden bowl](#) to be given out in a lottery drawing for the children in Ukraine and raised \$325,000. The State of WA has reached a \$518M settlement with the largest opioid distributors and a new orca was born to the K pod family of Southern Residents!

Because that's the thing; there is always good news. There is always hope. There are always people working and striving for the good. As Bishop Steven Charleston wrote this week, "Just when it looks like hope has walked out the front door, in walks a fresh supply through the back door." We can get so caught up and demoralized and fearful at all the bad news, that we forget that we have a good shepherd who leads and guides us; who strengthens us daily to do the good work we are called to do, one song, one bite of bread or sip of wine, one compost pile, one protest sign or donation to Ukraine at a time.

No matter what the future holds in store, the shepherd's voice is sure, our name is known and we are held in the embrace of that holy hand forever.

Gail Wheatley+