Easter IV, 2023 St. Barnabas

"Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am…."

Some time ago a popular poster circulated and appeared on bedroom and dormitory walls. This poster was no homage picturing the Beatles or Taylor Swift. No, this poster was only names. On a black background the names progressed through the seven colors of the electromagnetic spectrum visible to the human eye---from red to orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, and finally violet. Proceeding through the colors, the thirty-five names began "And thou shalt call his name Jesus, Prince of Peace" and continued through "Lamb of God, Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Root of David, Shepherd and Bishop of Souls." Many more. The list ended with "The Alpha and Omega." But there was one name that was different. In the very center of the poster against the graduated spectrum of colors blazed a name in dazzling white: I AM. "I am," the name of God given to Moses at the burning bush. I AM, in other words, I am being itself. I AM, the name that represents more than can be seen by the human eye. I AM, the <u>symbol</u> that stands in place of the reality of the prototype. I AM, the name you can trust.

Symbols are all around us. Symbols stand in place of the reality of the prototype. Symbols are material expressions of something beyond the visible. Often they represent the culture we live in, both physically and mentally. They epitomize a world of thought, internal and external reality. You could say symbols are coded language: They mean, not by words, but by being a representation of something beyond themselves. We understand them because we have a relationship with them.

Take, for example, "A six-pointed star, a crescent moon, a lotus, [these are] the symbols of other religions [than our own]. [They] suggest beauty and light. [A star, a moon, a flower.] The symbol of Christianity is more serious. The symbol of Christianity is an instrument of death."[1] Inside churches everywhere, on walls, altars, vestments…and outside on doors, windows, roofs, steeples, and towers…everywhere and anywhere in places marked out for Christian worship, one finds a cross. The symbol of Christianity is not, as some might think, a manger, an eternal flame, or even the representation of an empty tomb. No, the predominant symbol of our faith is a cross.

In the early days of the Church the celebration of Good Friday and Easter was virtually all one event---not separated, as we view them now. And that was as it should be, because Easter is essentially the message that the cross is a symbol of victory, not defeat; a symbol of hope, not fear. We preach Christ and him crucified [I Cor. 1:23]. And that proclamation is our good news.

As with most homilies, I'm not speaking of anything you don't already know. We've heard it all before. In church we give mental assent to the message that the cross is the way to new life, but few of us live as if we believe it. We are a little like the child in the book *O Ye Jigs and Juleps* who said, "Sacraments are

[1] Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A theological ABC*, [New York: Harper & Row, 1973], 19.

what you do in Church. What you do at home is something else."[2] Most of us live for the empty tomb, not the cross. We live for the reward and put out of our minds the cost.

I don't know about you, but I think my problem is not rational skepticism, as if I were saying, "I don't understand what suffering means." No, my problem is emotional skepticism, pondering, "How is it that loss becomes gain? How can suffering move toward transformation? Can anything make the emptiness go away?" It's nothingness that bothers us. For once expended, our hearts are empty, as empty as a desert. But

"You neglect and belittle the desert," wrote T. S. Eliot.

"The desert is not remote in southern tropics,

"The desert is not only around the corner,

"The desert is squeezed next to you,

"The desert is in the heart of your brother."[3]

Yes, the desert is in the heart.

So we shepherd ourselves to avoid the harsh and mountainous desert. We understand very well, O shepherds of Israel, how to find happiness. Everyone and everything around us have taught us how: Graduate from a good school and get a paying job. Work your way from small to big and bigger achievements. Line up a lucrative investment portfolio. Get elected Dean at Yale or Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church or President of the Corporation. Oh, yes, we understand success. Happiness is extremely rational. But joy? Deeply felt emotional wholeness? That kind of fullness we cannot attain. Joy comes only as a gift, a miraculous oasis in an empty wasteland.

This morning's reading from the gospel according to John marks the beginning of a reversal: Up to this point in the story, miracles precede faith. Now faith must precede miracle. Today's is not a story about sheep. Had the object at risk in the parable been something other than a sheep---say a lost book or a wayward child---then Jesus would have identified himself as the good librarian or the good parent. No, the focus of this story is not the object protected nor even the career of the defender. This story is a parable of attributes. The focus of this story is the unique identity of the giver, and that identity is clear: Jesus is good, He proclaims three times, and God alone is good [Mt. 19:17, Mk. 10:18, Lk. 18:19]. God alone can be trusted.

The figure of the shepherd is a symbol, standing in place of the reality of the prototype. When the writers of the Bible used the metaphor of the shepherd as the image of God, they were saying God is real. He is a part of common, everyday experience. He is someone in whom we can place a great deal of trust, materially as well as spiritually. How did a shepherd become a symbol of trust?

The shepherd was the mainstay of the economic system of the ancient Near East. To find pasturage, sheltered rest, and water together is not easy in Palestine; and while sheep find grass even when there appears

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[2] Virginia Cary Hudson, *O Ye Jigs & Juleps!* [New York: Macfadden-Bartell, 1964], 15.
[3] T.S. Eliot, "Choruses from 'The Rock,'" in *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1930], 149.

to be little and need to be watered only once daily, they must be led to both pasture and water. The Oriental shepherd was responsible for his flock in the widest sense: He gathered the sheep together, searched for the lost, tended the sick and healed them, guarded them against attack by beasts of prey and bandits, as well as leading them into the fold for shelter in inclement weather and to good pasture. Without him the sheep are helpless; with him they are secure, and they know it. The shepherd establishes a remarkable rapport with his flock; they recognize his voice, distinguish it from others, and learn to obey commands given by voice. They trust him.

Trust---what the apostle Paul meant when he used the word "faith"---is a verb. Both Paul and the author of the gospel according to John use the word "faith" only as a verb. Trust or faith is not a noun, not an idea. It is an activity, an action. It is what we're doing when we say, "I have faith in him." But these days we're having a lot of trouble understanding the components of faithing or trust. In fact, we're absolutely satiated with examples of un-trustworthiness: Daily we find the compounding of personal peccadillos has become a corporate sin. And we have begun to doubt whether our corporate self CAN be trusted. Do we know how to trust or to faith anymore? Why is trust such a rare commodity?

Before Vincent Gowen was the founding priest of this parish, he was a missionary in China and the Philippines. In 1928 he buried his wife in Besao Campo Santo, a mountain province of the Philippines. He wrote, "In her last illness, brought on by a grave accident, by the collapse of a sodden trail under her horse's foot, her thoughts roamed over these mountains. She had known them so briefly yet with a joy that surged through her words even when mind and speech wandered. Her last coherent sentence, spoken with a sudden calm from the midst of delirium, was, 'I came in trusting; I go out trusting.'"[4]

Is it safe to say we all come into being trusting, as Wordsworth wrote:

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting
And cometh from afar;
Not in entire forgetfulness
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come`
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy."[5]

[4] Vincent H. Gowen, *Sunrise to Sunrise: One man's Journey through History: China, The Philippines and World Wat II Internment*, [Victoria, BC, Canada: Trafford Publishing, 2008], 176.
[5] William Wordsworth, *Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.*

Then when does trust break down? Our first disappointment? Our first pain? Our first betrayal? Do we even know how to recognize one in whom we can put our trust, our faith? What is the reality in whom we can put our trust? Having left our infancy, how can faith or trust precede miracle?

Jesus enacts trust. His is not just symbolic trusting. He is trust. In the strongest possible terms, in the words God used to identify himself to Moses from out of the burning bush [Ex. 3:14], Jesus proclaims: "Ego eimi." "I am." Jesus equates himself with God, and what does he say about himself? I am…good, the noble protector who knows you. I am…good, the desirable lover who comes to establish relationship with you. I am…good, the servant leader who lays down my life for yours. I am…the identity of all that is good and true and beautiful. I am being itself, and in that life you can trust.

What Jesus has in mind is not the image of a career to be pursued but a symbol of faith. The symbol of a service to be rendered. The symbol of intentional self-emptying. The symbol of faith that precedes miracles. The symbol that leads to joy. The symbol of transformation. The symbol of death entered and overcome.

Rationally, we know that we are not the origin of good, and that knowledge threatens our fragile sense of self. But Jesus invites us to stand at the crossing of rationality and faith where the good is divided from the bad, where the one is integrated and the other refused, where the opposites within ourselves and in the world without are sundered by the cross.

Jesus invites us to find, to nourish, to offer every good gift---our physical capabilities, our rational convictions, our spiritual understandings---to risk being servant of all things, in order to serve the last and most ultimate of things.

Jesus invites us to serve the good in order to be in relationship with the source of all goodness.

Jesus invites us to pour out ourselves in self-offering in order that God may fill us with all goodness---not just up to our necks in oasis, but swept upstream with joy.

Jesus invites us to stand at the foot of the cross, the symbol of life over death. Standing at the foot of the cross where joy comes flooding into emptiness, where faith precedes miracle, where the Word of God is born out of silence saying I AM, we proclaim His new life and ours. ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA!

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