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AMDG

Easter 4A – May 7, 2014

If ever there was a gospel reading that begged to be put into context, it's this one. The Gospel of John is already a very dense piece of writing, filled with unusual imagery and obscure references, but when you throw in the mixed metaphors of shepherd and gate...well, it makes the best of New Testament scholars scratch their heads. So, what are we to make out of it?

In the Anglican tradition, we try to look at scripture from three perspectives – getting a triangulated reading so to speak. There's the literary perspective – what does the language mean, how was the writing structured, and what did it mean to the writers and the hearers; then the historical perspective – what was going on when this was written, and what was their historical perspective and agenda; - and the spiritual perspective – given what we've learned from the first two perspectives, and from our own experiences and where we are at this point in our spiritual journey, what does this mean to us?

With this particular passage, the language is especially challenging. The use of metaphors seems confusing at best. It starts out with a gatekeeper, who seems to be important. Then, there's the shepherd, which is then more fully developed. So, Jesus is a shepherd, then. But then in explaining the parable, Jesus says he's the gate. So, which is he, the shepherd, or the gate – and who's the gatekeeper? A little confusing isn't it?

Now, the shepherd is one of the most familiar and comforting images of Jesus in all the Gospel. But, the childhood image of a soft and tender Jesus, lovingly carrying a lamb in a garden, isn't what John intended. Most of us have little to no experience with the agrarian context John was writing from. While some of us may have had some experience with sheep, I'm sure none of us knows what it was like to tend sheep in first century Palestine. Sheep are not the cuddly creatures portrayed in sentimental pictures of Jesus the Shepherd. Sheep are smelly, dirty, nearsighted, and dimwitted creatures. Their wool gets tangled up with everything they walk in, including their own waste. They have very poor depth perception and can't readily tell when a gate is open or closed, which is why they tend to follow one another closely. They aren't very bright, and that coupled with poor sight means they get in all sorts of trouble. They can't be just let out on open range to fend for themselves - a shepherd is necessary just to keep sheep from killing themselves out of pure dumbness. Unless sheep know their shepherd pretty well

they can be anything from skittish to downright hostile. But, if they do know the shepherd well, they'll let the shepherd do just about anything to them, including manipulating them in all sorts of uncomfortable positions to shear their coats – which because of the lanolin and their accumulated gunk, is a very stinky and scratchy experience. So, forget the gentle Jesus, with the spotless flowing robes carrying a gentle little lamb. Think more like rancher.

Sheep in first century Palestine weren't kept in whitewashed fenced pens, either. They were corralled, along with neighbors' sheep, in an area that might have been part natural barrier, and partly fenced with rock or stacked brush and thorns. This enclosure was only to keep the sheep until they were taken to pasture. It had to be guarded against predators and thieves. Another reason it was important that sheep know their shepherd, was because, mixed in with everyone else's sheep, they would only follow a familiar voice or image. In the Rincon Mountains, near Reddington Pass, there's an area called Sheep's Pen where I used to hike. It's a narrow drainage, with rocky walls on either side, and remnants of a rock wall at the mouth. This is what I imagine the sheepfold John described was like. And the gate for this pen was probably some mesquite branches or boards that could easily be put in and out of place when the sheep needed to be moved to pasture. As for the bandit mentioned, what we don't get from this passage is that in the chapter before this, Jesus was addressing Pharisees. And that's probably who bandits were supposed to be here – the false teachers who could confuse and divide the followers.

We also need to know that the gate, and the shepherd are just two of seven "I am" statements Jesus uses throughout John. John's Gospel is largely built around these "I am" statements of Jesus. Can you remember the others – the bread of life; the way, the truth, and the life; the Resurrection and the Life; the Light of the World; and the vine (you are the branches). These statements were carefully selected by John to build on one another, and to be taken together. They were meant to be heard aloud, and not read from a book. Now, that we've delved into the language, a bit clearer picture might be forming.

Now this takes us to the historical context. Let's go back twenty centuries and look at the people for whom this was written. They are likely a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, gathered in someone's house, worshipping in secret, because they've been thrown out of the synagogue and are being hunted down by Romans. They consider themselves Jews, and like many other Jews they've been uprooted from their homes and farms and exiled from Palestine. They may remember of a time of relative prosperity, when they had sheep to tend or fishing boats to care for. But, now they scramble for survival. And meeting together, with others who follow Jesus, is part of their lifeline to the past. For them, the "I am" statements would

have been very powerful to the followers of Jesus. They would have understood the familiar images used by John.

Those first century followers of Christ – hungry, lost, rejected, and disconnected – heard in Jesus’ words the reassurance they needed to feel nourished, guided, and connected. If you were a Jewish Christian or a Gentile convert, these images would have helped you hold onto your heritage, even though you'd been evicted from the synagogue or persecuted by the officials because of your belief in Jesus. Your *manna* in the wilderness has become Jesus, *the Bread of Heaven*. Your *light*, a symbol of the law, is now identified with *Messiah* to whom the Torah and Prophets bore witness. The *way* promised to the one who follows God's wisdom and law is now identified with Jesus the Way. And *the shepherd*, a common sight across the ancient Mediterranean world and a common metaphor for leadership, is now Jesus the Good Shepherd. And all these images taken in light of the cross and resurrection meant that their suffering was being redeemed through Christ, and their way through this suffering was Jesus. And most important of all that Jesus was the way forward...into a new abundant life.

That brings us to the last statement in this passage. If the previous section of this Gospel could be complex and confusing, the last phrase is, in my opinion, the clearest statement of Jesus mission in the entire Gospel - I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. This is the whole reason for following Jesus in the first place. Repentance and redemption are the gateway for God’s children to live the life he intended for them - a life of abundance, a divine life as co-creators of the Kingdom of God.

So, looking back at the images given by John for Jesus – bread, gate, way, light, shepherd, gate, resurrection – and knowing that it is God’s intention that we have a fuller life than the one we live now, they give us an image of Jesus that is not just comforting, not just enlightening, not just inspiring, not just guiding – but an image that galvanizes us and moves us forward into the God life. The writer of John’s Gospel did not intend for his words to leave his listeners fat and happy. He intended for them to pull together, be strong, and move forward into a new life. And, move forward they did. Those beleaguered early Christians didn’t just survive, they thrived.

So, what does this say to us, here twenty centuries later? Is Jesus our shepherd or gate...or light, or bread, or life, or resurrection, or the way? The answer for us, just as it was for John’s audience is yes to all. Or yes to whatever images we need that free us to live lives of great blessing and joy – maybe Jesus is our login and password, or trailguide, or our Supreme Commander. Or perhaps shepherd and John’s other metaphors work for you. The correct images are the ones that get our attention and lead us into life abundant. Faith in Christ Jesus should free us from

the fear, anxiety, and confusion and propel us into living lives that are loving, joyful, and generously loving. But, that we don't just cherry pick the images of Jesus that suit us. But that we open ourselves to the fullness of Christ and his message, so that we might live life and live it fully, remembering the words of St. Irenaeus "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." While we don't live in the world of first century Christians, rejected, exiled, persecuted, and isolated; we do live in a world that has it's own dangers, it's own evils, it's own bandits who can steal our motivation to move forward. Like those first followers, we look for comfort and security, inspiration and guidance. And, the message of Jesus – through John and all of scripture – is do not fear, you are my beloved, and I am with you. Through faith in Christ Jesus we are guided through whatever adversity might befall us into the divine life prepared for us from the beginning of time. And as followers of Christ at St. Andrew's we need the images that John provides to nourish, to strengthen, to guide, and to propel us into being the face of Christ for each other and for the world.