

## Fourth Sunday of Easter, Cycle A

Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 23; 1Peter 2:20b-35; & John 10:1-10

Many of my recent conversations have centered on the uncertainty caused by the pandemic. A friend was unsure about going on unemployment so she could care for her preschooler without the herculean effort it has taken to arrange childcare. Another person was frantic because too much misinformation has convinced him that the scientific method that is helping us survive is untrustworthy. We almost fought and I am saddened by his ignorance and its accompanying desperation. At work, others want the budget I am drafting to show definitively if the organization can make enough money to continue. What we do know makes us frantic about what we don't know. Should we plant vegetables in case of a food shortage? When should we restart the economy or end social distancing? Are the protesters right?

In this Sunday's gospel, Jesus reminds us of what his disciples know for certain, his voice. He is the Good Shepherd who "calls his own sheep by name and leads them out... The sheep follow him because they *know* his voice." (*Oidasin* is better translated as *know* than *recognize* because *know* has the same kind of certainty to it.) Jesus offered the image of the Good Shepherd and that of the sheep gate to people in his day who were also uncertain. Just before this in John's gospel, people were debating the healing of the blind man. Who had healed him, how, and why? Was Jesus good or evil? The formerly blind man knew the answers and was promptly thrown out of the synagogue for his clear declaration.

On Pentecost, Peter proclaimed just as clearly, "Let the whole house of Israel know for certain that God has made both Lord and Christ this Jesus whom you crucified." Notice Peter offered redemption to the people who rejected Jesus. He did not confuse the events of his life with the real substance of his life, as many of us do. We are like a college student of mine who wrote at length about a fight in his high school that divided the senior class; what struck me was that the student still thinks this high school drama has permanent significance. In contrast, Teresa of Avila wrote, "All things are passing; God alone remains." I do not mean to trivialize anyone's life, but rather to point us toward the deeper reality that penetrates these lives. Peter offered the possibility of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit to "you and your children and to all those who are far off, whomever the Lord our God will call." We need to see through the confusion of the pandemic to the heart of the matter: the pandemic is the context of Jesus' call to follow him. Will we use this time to repent and reflect on how our baptism provides us with forgiveness and the Holy Spirit?

The image of the Good Shepherd draws our attention to aspects of the relationship Jesus wishes to have with us. He is willing to lay down his life for us (vs 11) and he leads us. His voice directs us along a path that is safe and life-giving. Our strange little passage from 1Peter tells us about this path. I say strange because it is part of a section instructing slaves to put up with unreasonable abuse from their masters – something our modern sensibilities find objectionable on many levels. Yet, there is a significant spiritual truth here. When he faced similarly unjust situations, Jesus chose to respond in a way that was completely different than his persecutors. Like the Suffering Servant from Isaiah 53, Christ chose to be meek, non-violent, self-sacrificing, to rescue those who have gone astray. In doing so, he became the *pattern* or *example* that we should follow. When we attack injustice with the unjust methods of our own and have as our goal domination, we are not walking on the path Jesus walked. We do not follow his voice. He requires of us a radically different lifestyle, an apparently foolish lifestyle. This path is actually the safe one. We need fear no evil, because the crucified and resurrected Jesus leads us through suffering to fullness of life.

How can we distinguish the Shepherd's voice in this pandemic with its clamoring of voices? This Sunday's readings hold up forgiveness and gentle love as shibboleths. Although the danger around us is real, any voices of anxiety, contention, violence, brashness or self-service are contrary to the voice of the Good Shepherd. And if we are dubious about the security of listening to him, Jesus tells us he is also our Sheep Gate: he places himself between us and all the negativity that threatens to devour us. Physical hardships, financial distress and illness may be real for us now, but we have both a guard and guide in Jesus who gives us the certainty we desperately seek.

- ❖ Where do you see gentleness or self-sacrifice creating real goodness in the midst of the pandemic?
- ❖ Identify the voices that distract you from Jesus' voice. Choose a line from the readings and pray it whenever you get confused about whose voice to follow.