

Sermon
Easter 4-C
St. Andrew's
May 8, 2022
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Acts 9:36-43
Psalm 23
Revelation 7:9-17
John 10:22-30

168 years before Christ, Antiochus IV, King of the Seleucid Dynasty in Syria, massacres Jews in Jerusalem, shuts down temple worship, and the following year erects an altar to Zeus in the Temple where he orders pigs to be sacrificed.

The Jews revolt and liberate the temple two years later under the leadership of Judas, nicknamed "Maccabeus" which means "the Hammer". Judas the Hammer, with his brothers and a rebel army kick out the enemy, remove the altar to Zeus and rededicate their Temple to the One True God. A great victory!

Ever since then in December Jews celebrate Hanukkah, which means "dedication", as an 8-day festival remembering the rededication of the Temple. You can read about this in the two Books of the Maccabees in our Apocrypha or in the Roman Catholic Bible.

In today's gospel Jesus is at the Temple during the Hanukkah celebration when those opposing him ask him if he is the Messiah.

Tell us Jesus—tell us plainly. **Are you going to become Jesus the Hammer and overthrow the oppressive, soul-crushing Roman Empire that is occupying our country?**

Of course, Jesus rejects the role of a violent Messiah leading a bloody revolution.

But he also rejects being passive in the face of suffering. Notice on Palm Sunday Jesus goes to Jerusalem when he could have retired to Galilee to tell his stories in peace and die in his sleep as a respected old rabbi.

But you know the story: after his baptism, **the Spirit electrifies Jesus to act out an alternative vision:** Through table fellowship with the

suffering and marginalized, through healing the sick and mentally oppressed, through parables describing the arrival of the mercy and forgiveness of the Realm of God, **Jesus creates a powerful, non-violent resistance to oppressive systems that destroy communities, trash creation, and crush souls.**

Jesus embodies the unconditional Divine Love that is present in every moment luring us to seek first the Kingdom of God. This is the Jesus-Movement, says our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry.

 It doesn't take long for the religious and political powers to realize what a threat Jesus is, so they execute him on a Friday afternoon and sleep like babies that night knowing the threat has been neutralized.

But then on Sunday morning, the threat comes back to life and begins infecting his depressed followers with his electric Spirit, so that they too may embody the Jesus-Movement.

The early church builds diverse communities around an agape fellowship, in which Jesus is both host and meal. They care for the sick and the oppressed, and live out the mercy the Good Shepherd generates among and inside them.

 Today, The Fourth Sunday of Easter, is called Good Shepherd Sunday because of the readings:

+In Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd; * I shall not be in want."

+In Revelation: "for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

In John: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."

The Collect of the Day draws together these images and prays, "O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads".

Music on this day also reflects this image, so by the end of the service we are like the sheep who "lie down in green pastures...beside still waters.

It is right to feel comfort in these images and to trust Jesus, who 1st Peter calls, "the shepherd and guardian of our souls."

I've told you before of a man in my NC parish named Wat Holley, who after his wife of 55 years dies goes into a deep depression, until one day he collapses on the garage floor near death himself. But then, Wat, in addition

to following his doctor's advice to take anti-depressants, also starts praying the 23rd Psalm several times a day, slowly and with feeling, and within a few months Wat walks out of the "valley of the shadow of death" and becomes the ebullient, dapper man we knew and loved.

If you are in a hard place today, I encourage you to let Jesus be your Good Shepherd, trusting him as your faithful companion who leads you into the goodness and mercy of God, for as Jesus says, "The Father and I are one." And he prays in John 17 that "they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, **may they also be in us.**

But I also need tell you there is much more to the image of the Good Shepherd than our personal comfort.

Ever since David was both shepherd and King, the Shepherd is an image the Bible uses to describe the King. You can see that throughout the psalms and the prophets:

Listen closely to **the Prophet Ezekiel** in Chapter 34 when he says:

"The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel.... Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. **You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.**" Ezekiel 34

So when Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd, that is, the Good King, **he is making a political statement**—he is sent by God to free the people from the harshness of their rulers, so they may finally know the peace and prosperity of the Beloved Community of God.

So our Collect of the Day rightly says that Jesus is doing two things for us: he is calling us each by name **and** he is **calling us to follow where he leads.**

Therefore, we must have our souls restored in green pastures and beside the still water of the mercy of God AND we must get off our rear ends to embody Jesus's non-violent engagement with any dehumanizing political and corporate structures that **"do not strengthen the weak, do not heal the sick, do not bind up the injured, do not bring back the strayed, and do not seek the lost."**

Of course, it is this engagement with the power structures of his day as if he were speaking for God that gets Jesus killed.

It is unfortunate that our gospel ends with verse 30, because verse 31 reads, "They picked up stones with which to stone him."

We are living through contentious times, facing complex issues that require more than "all or nothing" thinking.

It would be easy to run and hide in our middle-class comforts, but Jesus calls us to "walk with him through the valley of the shadow of death".

But he also says we are "to fear no evil" For "Surely God's goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life."