

Being a Good Shepherd Mom & Becoming One

4 Easter C

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First Reading: Acts 9:36-43

Dorcas was a faithful & devoted woman of charity in the community of Joppa. Her kindness & her work with clothing were well-known, especially to the widows in town. When she fell ill & died, Peter raised her back to life through the power of prayer.

³⁶Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works & acts of charity. ³⁷At that time she became ill & died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." ³⁹So Peter got up & went with them; & when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping & showing tunics & other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. ⁴⁰Peter put all of them outside, & then he knelt down & prayed. He turned to the body & said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, & seeing Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹He gave her his hand & helped her up. Then calling the saints & widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴²This became known throughout Joppa, & many believed in the Lord. ⁴³Meanwhile Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

Gospel: John 10:22-30

Jesus responds to questions about his identity with the remarkable claim that he & the Father are one. Those who understand this are his sheep; they hear his voice, follow, & will never be snatched from his hand.

²²At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³& Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴So the Judeans gathered around him & said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." ²⁵Jesus answered, "I have told you, & you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; ²⁶but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, & they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, & they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹What my Father has given me is greater than all else, & no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. ³⁰The Father & I are one."

Theological Reflection

The fourth Sunday of Easter is also known as Good Shepherd Sunday. This day each year the gospel reading comes from one of the passages in John's gospel in which Jesus describes himself as a shepherd caring for sheep. Even though many people have little or no firsthand understanding of a shepherd's day-to-day work, this image of a strong & caring protector continues to resonate. Being known by name, being protected when dangers come, being cared for by someone who really knows us—these are powerful images of human needs.

Theological Reflection

Psalm 23 can be read as an outline of the life of faith. The Christian life begins in baptism when God claims us as children. Throughout the journey of life God cares for God's people, bringing rest & comfort. God's people are protected along the way, & even when the worst happens the promise of God's presence sustains. Along the way God's people are fed & nourished. Finally, at the last, God's people are promised a place Jesus himself has prepared. Psalm 23 holds life & death, joy & sorrow, fear & courage; life accompanied by the promises of God.

[John 10:22-30](#)

Closing the Johannine discourse about Jesus as the good shepherd is another indication of the controversy in the late 1st century, when the gospel was written, between the growing Christian community & Jewish religious authorities. Jesus is speaking from the temple precincts & claims for his own followers the historically Jewish religious language that likens the people to God's sheepfold. Especially in claiming unity between Jesus & God the Father the passage contrasts Christian belief with Jewish doctrine. The festival of Dedication is what we know as Hanukkah, which celebrated the rededication of the temple & fell 3 months later than the gospel's last calendric reference, to the feast of Tabernacles (7:37). We praise the risen Christ as the shepherd whose voice calls us to follow him into eternal life. The entire flock is in the hand of Christ, which is God's hand. The sheep are given life, but they must follow him there. Jesus' claim to oneness with God & pre-existence with him ([8:58](#)) has aroused some listeners. Some think he is demented but others doubt it, for he heals (vv. [20-21](#)). Later, at Hanukkah ("Dedication", v. [22](#)), Jesus is in a cloister in the Temple grounds ("the portico of Solomon", v. [23](#)). They ask whether he is the "Messiah" (v. [24](#)), the one whom Jews expected to come to establish a godly kingdom.

To understand the answers he has given requires faith – which they lack. His Godly actions (“works”, v. [25](#)) show who he is. To those who do believe, who are his “sheep” (v. [27](#)), he gives “eternal life” (v. [28](#)) & assurance that they will not be condemned to annihilation (“perish”) at the end-time. He will ensure that they remain his. What his Father has given him (v. [29](#)) is a “command” (v. [18](#)): that through his voluntary sacrifice on the cross & return to life he will bring his “sheep” (followers) to oneness with both the Father & the Son (vv. [14-18](#)).

[Acts 9:36-43](#)

This episode exemplifies Luke’s emphasis in Acts that with the help of the Holy Spirit the disciples are continuing the ministry of Christ. Peter’s raising of Dorcas parallels Jesus’ raising of the daughter of Jarius (Luke 8:49-56). Joppa was a coastal city in northern Judea. Dorcas is praised for her care for the poor, another theme important for Luke. That Dorcas is called a disciple reminds us that “disciple” is not a male term. Luke gives women important but secondary roles in the church of the first century. During the Sundays of Easter, the first readings come from Acts, to emphasize the ongoing power of Christ’s resurrection through the Spirit. Here a disciple is praised for her contributions to a charity (albeit a gender-stereotyped one), & Peter aided by prayer can raise the dead. Resuscitation of a corpse is not what the New Testament means by resurrection. Yet those who are in Christ can experience a renewed life. Peter is visiting people who are already Christians (near modern Tel Aviv). In Lydda, he has healed a paralyzed man (Aeneas); he has said to him “Jesus Christ heals you” (v. [34](#)). Now he visits Joppa. “Tabitha” (v. [36](#), an Aramaic name) & “Dorcas” both mean *gazelle*. Luke often emphasizes helping the poor (“acts of charity”, v. [36](#)). V. [37](#) echoes the story of Elijah reviving the widow’s son; Peter’s action here is in continuity with the Old Testament & with Jesus’ acts of healing, especially of Jairus’ daughter (Luke [8:40-42](#), [49-56](#)). Luke calls followers “disciples” (vv. [38](#), [36](#)). Christian “widows” (v. [39](#)) generally devoted their time to good works. As was the custom, people wept openly when someone died. The widows remember Tabitha’s help to many, in sewing inner garments (“tunics”) & cloaks for them. As did Jesus, Peter gets *peace & quiet* (here, by sending the mourners outside, v. [40](#).) With the help of the Holy Spirit, Peter commands Tabitha to rise, be resurrected, be brought back to life. In Aramaic, his command to her sounds like Jesus’ words to Jairus’ daughter: *talitha koum[ij]*. Peter shows members of the Christian community (“saints & widows”, v. [41](#)) that Tabitha is alive again; God’s action through him leads many to faith (v. [42](#)). We do not know whether “Simon” (v. [43](#)) is a Christian. He is a “tanner”, a person Jewish law

considered defiled, for he worked with animal carcasses, which were ritually unclean. Peter has begun to disregard Jewish practices.

Images in the Readings

To deepen our contemplation of the metaphor of Christ as *shepherd*, it is good to review the positive use that the Bible makes of the image of *sheep*. The Hebrew Scriptures remembered the past as a nomadic life of herders of sheep & goats. Sheep signified the communal life of the people, constituted a source of food & clothing, & functioned as the primary sacrificial gifts to God. The single wandering lamb from Luke's parable of the lost sheep is not the image in John 10; nor does the Bible describe sheep as being dirty; nor is a bare-footed white-robed man a realistic depiction of the shepherd, who by the 1st century was thought of as lower-class & religiously unclean. Shepherds were both male & female. Christians adapted pagan religious sculpture to depict Jesus as the divine good shepherd. The early Christian movement was largely an urban phenomenon, & thus shepherding was a distant reality. That Dorcas contributed *clothes* for the needy has continued throughout history as a primary Christian charity. The *white robe* worn by the blessed dead is recalled in contemporary albs (priest robes), which mean to signify not clerical status but baptismal identity. Many artists depicted Jesus as wearing white, unlikely considering the difficulty of keeping white clean. This imagery is symbolic, as if Jesus shines with the light of God. In the Bible, God is described as having human body parts, in John 10 a *hand*. In contrast to Greco-Roman paganism, although God is referred to as a "he," the biblical God does not have or use male sexual organs.

Throughout John, responses to Jesus vary. This is the case once more in Ch10. Jesus has been in Jerusalem since his arrival for the Festival of Booths (7:10), teaching regularly in the temple complex. His teaching evokes discussion concerning his identity, origins, & authority, & results in a division among the people. Some believe he is the Messiah, & others believe that he is demon-possessed, or worse, a blasphemer who deserves to die (7:40-44; 8:48, 59). After the first part of Jesus' good shepherd discourse in John 10, there is a similar divided response: "Again the Jews were divided because of these words. Many of them were saying, 'He has a demon & is out of his mind. Why listen to him?' Others were saying, 'These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?'" (10:19-21)

It is not clear how much time has passed between that discussion & the discourse that begins at John 10:22, which takes place at the time of the festival of the Dedication

(Hanukkah). Once again Jesus is at the temple complex, this time in the portico of Solomon (10:23). Some Jews gather around him & ask Jesus to put an end to the debate concerning his identity once & for all: “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly” (10:24). The problem, of course, is that regardless of what Jesus says or does, the debate does not end. Jesus responds that he has already told them, & that the works he has done in his Father’s name testify to him, but they do not believe, because they do not belong to his sheep (10:25-26). The words & works of Jesus are open to many interpretations. The incident of the preceding chapter makes that abundantly clear. After Jesus heals a man born blind, the Pharisees see only that Jesus has healed on a Sabbath, & that therefore he must be a sinner, while others question how a sinner can perform such signs (John 9:16). The blind man gradually comes to realize who Jesus is &, in the end, worships him as Lord (9:38). Jesus says: “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, & those who do see may become blind” (9:39).

There is a tension between God’s initiative & human responsibility that is not resolved in John’s Gospel (or perhaps in the entire Bible!). It is only with the eyes of faith that one can see the truth concerning Jesus. Those who belong to Jesus, who hear & recognize his voice & follow him, have been given to him by the Father (10:29). Everything depends on God’s initiative. God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him (3:16-17). At the same time, the result of Jesus’ coming into the world is that those who do not believe are subject to judgment (3:18-19). The preacher cannot resolve this tension. Neither can the preacher argue people into faith with convincing words. (Even Jesus could not do that!) But the preacher can declare the promise that creates & sustains faith—the promise of the Good Shepherd to give us eternal life, the promise that no one will be able to snatch us out of his hand (10:28). The preacher can also help hearers discern the Shepherd’s voice amidst all the other voices that clamor for our attention, many of whom claim to speak for God. Those voices are legion, but we do not always recognize how contrary they are to the voice of the Good Shepherd.

For instance, there are many voices that tell us how to grow closer to God: by having a prescribed religious experience, by believing the correct doctrine, by reaching a higher level of knowledge or a higher level of morality. By contrast, the Good Shepherd tells us that everything depends on belonging to him. Never does our status before God depend on how we feel, on having the right experience, on being free of doubt, or on what we accomplish. It depends on one thing only: that we are known by the shepherd: “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, & they follow me. I give them eternal life, & they will never perish” (John 10:28).

The voice of the Good Shepherd is a voice that liberates rather than oppresses. It does not say, “Do this, & then maybe you will be good enough to be one of my sheep.” It says, “You belong to me already. No one can snatch you out of my hand.” Secure in this belonging, we are free to live the abundant life of which Jesus spoke earlier in the chapter: “I came that they may have life & have it abundantly” (John 10:10). The abundant life of which Jesus speaks is not necessarily about abundance in years, or in wealth, or status, or accomplishments. It is life that is abundant in the love of God made known in Jesus Christ, love that overflows to others (John 13:34-35). It is eternal life because its source is in God who is eternal (17:3), & in Jesus, who is the resurrection & the life (11:25-26). Amidst all the other voices that evoke fear, make demands, or give advice, the voice of the good shepherd is a voice of promise—a voice that calls us by name & claims us as God’s own.

Thoughts about a Good Shepherd Mom & Becoming One

- 1) Was your mom good at “telling you plainly,” that she loved, supported and cared for you? Are you good at that with others?
- 2) Recall some ways in which you know your mom’s “voice” and how she knows you. How do you build this & live this way with others?
- 3) Recall a time(s) when mom has not allowed the ‘world’ to “snatch you from her hand.” How have you done this for others?