

Scripture Readings and Sermon

May 3, 2020 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Acts 2:42-47 (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

This early snapshot of the church at first seems like an ideal community. A small utopia in which the communal ideas take their highest form. This, however, would be a glorification of an extremely difficult time in the life of the church. Jesus had been executed and all those who openly followed the teaching of Jesus were banded from the synagogues. Being banded does not simply mean "missing church" but rather an exclusion from the community and the social net. Individuals were disowned by their families and fired from their jobs. Families were divided and those who were left on the outside soon discovered that they were neither Jew nor Greek. These shunned individuals only had each other to turn to for comfort and support. The sharing of wealth was necessary for the survival of this early church. It was the teaching of the good news by those who had followed Jesus that gave this young community hope and a sense of purpose. These believers found a new family in Christ and, just like a family, they shared everything in common. Families seem to thrive when threatened by an outside force that unites them and forces them to depend on each other. It is only when there is a sense of safety that families begin to become aware of how annoying siblings can behave. The church would soon experience this as they dealt with the inclusion of Gentiles into the family.

Commentary on 1 Peter 2:19-25 (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

The lectionary reading starts after Peter identifies the target audience, "Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference" (18). While Peter begins by placing suffering in the context of "harsh masters", he then expands the concept of suffering within Christ's suffering. A Christian will unjustly suffer because the world that rejected Jesus will also reject the Christian. Note that what is considered just and unjust is not according to human laws or societal codes but rather is set by "the one who judges justly". Enduring suffering because of the consequences of disobedience to God's will revealed in Jesus is of no credit. Enduring suffering in pursuit of God's will results in "God's approval". That approval, however, is not an easy of human suffering but rather the assurance of eternal redemption. Suffering for the sake of suffering often practiced as acts of penance in the church is neither warranted nor redemptive. Self inflicted suffering that does not produce the fruits of love revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus is self-centered and self-destructive. The shepherd does not make the sheep suffer unless the suffering leads to safer and green pastures. When the sheep arrive at that destination, they are healed by his wounds and find their souls held safely in the palm of his hands.

Commentary on John 10:1-10 (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

While Psalm 23 is the most often referred to Old Testament reference to "shepherd", this passage has more in common with three prophets. Zechariah 11 provides a description of a worthless shepherd. "[A] shepherd who does not care for the perishing, or seek the wandering, or heal the maimed, or nourish the healthy, but devours the flesh of the fat ones, tearing off even their hoofs." (11:16) Jeremiah 23 begins with "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD." The thieves and bandits in this book are not outsiders but religious leaders who gain authority not through righteousness (the gate) but through inheritance (another way). These shepherd on come to "steal and kill and destroy" by feeding upon the flock. In Ezekiel 34, the Lord says, "Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?" (34:2). In response to these worthless shepherds described in Zechariah and Jeremiah, the Lord promises in Ezekiel that "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD." (34:15) This is the proclamation of John 10. Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise of Ezekiel and the response to the "worthless" shepherds. Not only is Jesus the gatekeeper, the

one that knows the sheep by name and whose voice is known by the sheep. But Jesus is also the gate, the Way to salvation and abundant life through which all future shepherds must enter.

Sermon "Abundant Living" (*Sermon Video*)

Most people have a hand full of "go to" scripture verses. One of mine is John 10:10 "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly". The importance of this verse for me is probably rooted in the fact that, for much of my youth, religion was more about rules than life. Failure to live up to these rules broke my relationship with both my parents and the church. It was only later, through the intercession of a woman destined to be my wife, that I learned of grace and abundant life offered in Christ.

Opening myself to the possibility of God's love, opened my heart not only to God's amazing grace but to the beauty and wonder of all of God's creation. Relationships became more precious and the desire for material acquisition diminished. It was only in this light that I realized how far I had strayed. In 1 Peter, Peter says that we have all strayed like lost sheep but that Jesus is the shepherd and guardian of our souls. Having Jesus as one's shepherd, however, is not always easy. Sometimes, the shepherd must poke and prod the sheep down the path to greener pastures. And sometimes that path can be rocky and result in short term suffering. Jesus offers healing but healing does not always come quickly or easily. This is the type of suffering Peter refers to when he talks about following in Jesus' steps. There are times when we can love God and neighbor and please ourselves but there are other times that in order to love God and our neighbor, we must deny ourselves. This is the suffering that Jesus did for us and calls us to be willing to do if needed.

This placing of others and God above our own self interest is the example we are given by the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd cares for his sheep first and therefore the sheep know his voice and trust him. Thieves and bandits care only for themselves and use the sheep to satisfy themselves. God compares religious leaders to these worthless shepherds in Zechariah 11, Jeremiah 23, and Ezekiel 34. In contrast, Jesus is the Good Shepherd who both tends the sheep as a shepherd and guards the sheep as their gate protecting them from thieves and bandits. The Good Shepherd only wants the best for the sheep and for them to live life abundantly.

Unfortunately, when we follow the Good Shepherd and join His flock, there are others who will reject us and may even cause us to suffer. The original followers after Pentecost were not welcomed by the Jewish leaders and their society but, for most, they found that they were cast out of both their society and their families. The communal living described in Acts was as much a necessity as it was a living out of Jesus' teaching. Together, with Jesus as their shepherd, these disciples discovered a new family and a new purpose in life. Like I discovered many years ago, a life in Christ is an abundant life. Abundant in love and relationships. May you experience such an abundant life even during a pandemic.