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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 30, 2023

Lectionary Year A: John 10:1-10

Those of you who have attended any kind of professional or church retreat know the routine: Your days are pretty much full for the duration! Thus, upon your return, you're more likely *drained* instead of *refreshed and renewed*. As most of you know, I spent the last several days in New Hampshire at The Gathering for Recovery Ministries of the Episcopal Church, which featured workshops, keynote speakers, small group breakouts, and the like. All of this was tremendously informative and invigorating, but I could tell that, by the end of the day, I was tuckered out, too! But I think I gained meaningful insights and tools for ministry in this context, and I will share them in the near future as an adult education opportunity.

Fortunately, I'm not so tuckered out that ministry among you this morning was impossible, and I have something to share that ties together this morning's Gospel text with at least a few things that I gleaned from The Gathering. Today, like many Fourth Sundays of Easter you've experienced in the past, is "Good Shepherd Sunday," and the images of shepherds and sheep – familiar images, indeed – revisit us and place pressure on (particularly) the preacher to draw some fresh insights out of

these familiar images. Not wanting to give in to that pressure, though, I would instead like to allow our Gospel text to speak for itself.

We know sheep to be rather unintelligent, if “cute,” creatures, and they can be easy prey for predators, such as wolves. Not surprisingly, sheep-and-wolves imagery occurs fairly frequently in the Gospels, and, like any good teacher, Jesus himself developed illustrations out of that which would have made his lessons understandable to his audience (though that didn’t necessarily work, as we are reminded today). We probably don’t see a lot of sheep and shepherds in northern Indiana these days, but, in Jesus’ time, they would’ve been much more plentiful by comparison.

Shepherd-and-sheep imagery, then, has been applied by the Church to the clergy and the laity. An obvious example would be the crozier – or “shepherd’s staff” – that our bishops carry. Just like the shepherds of ancient times, bishops have staffs to use so that they might bring their “flocks” back into line, or, perhaps, gently guide and correct them when necessary. Of course, the laity of the Church might be insulted by being compared to common and often, ahem, *unintelligent* sheep. One needs to be careful, therefore, when applying such imagery *wherever* one happens to be preaching!

Given this, perhaps, less-than-preferable option for further illustrating, I would instead invite us to consider something I heard someone bring up at The Gathering. It was, in essence, the second half of the final verse of today's text – "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10b). Let's not dwell on the shepherd-and-sheep imagery; instead, let's get to the point of it all. There's a whole lot of nasty stuff in the world that can "steal" the "sheep" away from where they're supposed to be and what they're supposed to be doing. But with Jesus, the sheep can be saved (John 10:9b) and spared the fate that could meet them *without* Jesus.

Naturally, at a gathering of Episcopalians in recovery, I encountered a very specific lens through which all of this would be viewed. The "thief" taking the "sheep" away from abundant life is, obviously, *addiction*. I'll refrain from sharing my life story at this moment – which indeed lends itself to such an interpretation – but it might not be all that helpful to *you*. Instead, let's think about what the Church ideally offers as we apply our Gospel text to our life together.

Jesus came "that [we] may have life, and have it abundantly." In this season of Easter, "life" has a pretty specific application – here, to the life that comes forth from death in our Lord's resurrection. This is *transformation*. For us, that transformation would be from an "old self" to a "new self," from *sickness* to *health* (at least spiritually), from *addiction* to *recovery*, or, not surprisingly, from *death* to

life. God has an infinitely important role in *all* of this – from his entrance into our sufferings through the sufferings of Christ himself, as well as his continual presence among us in the hearing of our prayers and in the ministries of the Word proclaimed and the Sacraments administered. God is there *through it all*. God instructs and calls us through the Word. God makes us his own in Baptism and carries us through Christ’s death and resurrection – from an “old self” to a “new self” by water and the Word. God nourishes and strengthens us through the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion. Yes, these things have the power to *transform* us over time into the *whole* and *redeemed* people God wants us to be!

Earlier, I mentioned the very obvious way that addicts experience this transformation in recovery. Naturally, there are questions as to how this might apply to non-addicts. Well, let me assure you that *no one* needs to develop a full-blown addiction in order to experience transformation! *Everyone* has something that either prevents or impedes God’s transformative work in his or her life. A thief can be stealing anyone at any time away from the life that God wants for that person. We might look at how brokenness – whether it be of family, of relationships, or of life in general – keeps people in states of anger or resentment; *this* in itself is sufficient to make anyone’s life miserable.

But – guess what – Christ can enter into that brokenness *provided we let him*. That involves *acknowledging* the brokenness (instead of pretending it’s not there) and

asking him to bring his resurrection into our death. I sincerely believe that if it worked for him, it can work for us! When we call on our Lord to assist us, he will answer us – probably not with the answer we were looking for, however. That is when, though, we can begin to embrace the transformation he has already undertaken in us. And when we have grown weary with *death*, he will surely bring us *life*.

Jesus says, “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved...” (John 10:9a). Today, as you probably have noticed on a lot of Sundays, the gate is opened once again to you – but not, as you may have thought in the past, to the “perfect” sheep. Jesus didn’t come to save “perfect” sheep; he came for the *broken* sheep. His is the pasture where the sheep get better...through healing, through restoration, and (yes) through *transformation*. All that is needed now is for you to have the humility to accept your brokenness, and walk through the gate – Jesus himself. His very self as it is offered here today in Word and Sacrament can be *your* passage to abundant life.

Amen.