

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 7, 2017

Said Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year A: Acts 6:1–9; 7:2a, 51–60; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19–25; John 10:1–10

What we know as the tenth chapter of John stands between Jesus' healing of the man born blind—chapter nine—and the raising of Lazarus from the dead—chapter eleven.

The man born blind was rejected by his family, by the people of his community, and by the religious leaders of his community when he could not see. When he gained his sight, he was thrown out of the temple. Jesus seeks him out and explains, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind.”¹ The passage continues, “Some of the Pharisees near him heard this, and they said to him, ‘Are we also blind?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, “We see,” your guilt remains.’”²

Today's gospel lesson is the first half of two stories about the shepherd that comprise chapter ten. We will

¹ John 9:39.

² John 9:40–41.

have the rest of this first story next year.³ In the third year of the Lectionary cycle, we will hear the other, shorter story.⁴ But for today, Jesus responds to these men saying, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber; but he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.”⁵

Next year the appointed gospel begins with Jesus saying, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”⁶

What follows the narratives about the shepherd is, again, the raising of Lazarus, Jesus’ friend, who has been dead for four days before Jesus’ and his disciples reach his home.⁷

Earlier in John, Jesus has taught, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.”⁸—the man born

³ John 10:11–16.

⁴ John 10:22–30.

⁵ John 10:12. My punctuation.

⁶ John 10:11.

⁷ John 11:1–44.

⁸ John 5:24.

blind has believed and has passed from death to life. Jesus continued, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.”⁹ He will tell Lazarus’ sisters Mary and Martha, “I am the Resurrection and the Life.”¹⁰ The Son of God is God of the living and the dead.

John the Evangelist places Jesus’ words about being our shepherd are framed by blindness and death, signs for us of Jesus’ power to heal whatever burdens we carry. Jesus is the gate through which the sheep enter and leave the fold. He is the door. He is shepherd who leads his sheep to a pasture where they will be safe and where they will be fed.

I don’t think it can be said enough that in John’s gospel every man and woman is in a direct relationship with Jesus. The sheep are his, his alone. There are no apostles in this gospel. The twelve are mentioned in two stories only¹¹—and unlike Mark, Matthew, and

⁹ John 5:25.

¹⁰ John 11:25.

¹¹ John 6:67; 20:24.

Luke,¹² the text of John identifies only Thomas the Twin specifically as being one of the twelve.¹³

So, the last words of today's gospel passage: Jesus said, "I came that [my sheep] may have life, and have it abundantly."¹⁴

Let me ask this: What comes into our human lives to steal our ability to hear God's Word and to believe? Let me also ask: What comes into our human lives that deprives us of what we need to live with confidence that our lives really matter not only to those for whom we want it to matter, but also to our Creator, to God?

In John, Jesus is present as the incarnate Son of God. He is present to us as the Word and as the one who dwells in and among those who believe. He feeds us.

I've got two books going now on the world of the Roman Empire, one by Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD*, the other by Mary

¹² Mark 3:14–19; Matthew 10:2–4; Luke 6:13–16.

¹³ John 20:24.

¹⁴ John 10:10.

Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome*. (Her book stops at AD 212—when the emperor made every free person throughout the empire a citizen of Rome.) I don't think I know enough to say very much about either book, except to say that the historical record available to us shows a far more violent world than I imagined. For the vast majority of humankind, there was poverty, slavery, and not much food.

Into this world, Jesus brought new relationship with God and among those who could believe in him. Christians fed each other. Christians kissed each other. Christians lovingly buried their dead, especially those who were executed for their faith.

New Testament scholar Sandra Schneiders points out in a footnote in her wonderful book, *Written That You May Believe*, that, “The evangelist never uses the nouns ‘belief’ or ‘faith’ but only verbal forms of ‘to believe.’” In John, “faith is not a condition or state of being or [a] possession but an active engagement with God.”¹⁵ A person believes by following Jesus’ word to him or her. He or she has what Jesus called, “the light of

¹⁵ Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2003), 85.

life.”¹⁶ For John, Jesus has let us hear his Word and he invites each of us to follow as he calls.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Copyright © 2017 The Society of the Free Church of St. Mary the Virgin, New York, New York.

All rights reserved.

¹⁶ John 8:12.