

Denice K. Leslie
April 13, 2008
4th Sunday in Easter
John 10: 1 – 10



“People Need the Lord”

Joke:

Sister Mary Ann, who worked for a home health agency, was out making her rounds visiting homebound patients when she ran out of gas. As luck would have it, a Texaco Gasoline station was just a block away.

She walked to the station to borrow a gas can and buy some gas. The attendant told her that the only gas can he owned had been loaned out, but she could wait until it was returned. Since Sister Mary Ann was on the way to see a patient, she decided not to wait and walked back to her car.

She looked for something in her car that she could fill with gas and spotted the bedpan she was taking to the patient. Always resourceful, Sister Mary Ann carried the bedpan to the station, filled it with gasoline, and carried the full bedpan back to her car.

As she was pouring the gas into her tank, two protestants watched from across the street. One of them turned to the other and said, 'If it starts, I'm converting!'

(Thank you John Erb!)



*****Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. The beautiful words for the 23rd Psalm give us a sense of God's abiding presence and fill us with peace. Acts talks to us about the joys to be found in Christian community as the first believers gathered in each others homes and celebrated with glad and generous hearts. The theme of God's sustaining abundance reigns over us!

And in today's gospel Jesus speaks of shepherds—trustworthy and untrustworthy. It would be easy for us to bath in the quiet waters and simply see John's gospel lesson as another way of affirming yet again God's goodness for us. But as always the Good News is not just Good news for us alone.



The unfolding tragedy of the fundamentalist Latter Day Saints polygamist

colony in Texas is one revolting horror after another.

Watching the social service agents holding up blankets to provide some privacy from the media as women and children in pastel pioneer dresses clutched bed pillows and boarded busses—over one hundred and thirty who left by choice ---was surreal.

Only this isn't a made for TV Lifetime drama—this is real: that life sanctioned by religion should consist of growing to the age of puberty only to be cast out and banished from the community and your home with little or no education if a teenage boy so there is no competition for the older men seeking increasing numbers of wives in their harem; or to be forced into plural marriage and sex with men thirty years older if a girl child is sickening and tragic.

Their prophet Warren Jeffs was successfully convicted of assault by a victim of his religious community who managed to break away—the victim of a forced marriage to her cousin as a young teen.

This man claims he is God's prophet and that without him there is no salvation for his people. The whole community is organized to support him and the male elders of the community—and not just from the Texas enclave.

He basically abandoned a community in Arizona where the occupants continue to send him the profits from their subsistence life style for his support. Women and children doing manual labor, confined and cut off from the rest of culture and society. Yes, it's a cult. And it promised abundant life. And look at the large numbers of people involved not just in the Texas polygamist community but in several.

When it was reported that documents were found outlining a plan for cyanide poisoning of the occupants in the event of an outside threat from government authorities I was chilled.

I'll never forget getting ready for worship one Sunday morning nearly 30 or more years ago now, turning on the TV to get the weather

report and seeing the bodies of 900 men, women and children lying like bloated cord wood, side by side in the tropical heat of a South American jungle compound. They had all been forced to drink Koolaide laced with cyanide. The prophet of this religious communal venture? Jim Jones. The community: Jonestown.

The people attracted to Jones were seeking Christian social action to relieve the inequities of poverty and other social ills; those without employment, those subsisting on inadequate nutrition, without access to health care, the old, the marginalized, single mothers and children on welfare for generations. Inflation was taking off, gas prices were high. The financial squeeze was on. Do you remember the gas lines? Impatient with the Church and society at large to challenge these conditions, many were seeking direction, a leader for their cause. Jones rose up and said, "Follow me! I'll lead you into the promised land!"

The urban poor and idealist young adults followed. He promised them change. He promised them abundant life! They were looking for direction and a way to make a difference. Sheep without a shepherd. Lead to the slaughter. Because they lacked the voice of the Good Shepherd to lead them.

Don't think it couldn't happen again? Think again. There is something in our DNA that makes us as human beings vulnerable to flocking together and looking to some leader, some strong figure who will take care of us. We want to be secure, we want to believe and we want direction for our lives.

Cooperation is after all essential to our survival as a species. Unfortunately, what is a strong inherent part of our evolutionary make up for survival is also a point of extreme vulnerability. There's a lot of competition out there among those who would love to fill the position of being our shepherd.



We Christians make an ancient profession of faith when we become disciples of Jesus. We say Jesus is Lord.

We chose him to be our Shepherd with good reason:

One Christian commentator puts it this way,

“There are two ways to understand why we confess Jesus as Lord and what that means: The first is that if Jesus is Lord, then the position is filled; no others need apply. If Jesus is not Lord, then there are countless others who will try to take that position in your life: bosses, politicians, parents; acquisitions, (work), ambitions, causes; always just one more favor to do, one more promotion to get, one more enemy to defeat, before you can rest secure.

Bob Dylan was right when he sang, "You've Gotta Serve Somebody," and those other would-be masters are bad news, keeping us penned up with anxiety and work toward things which never turn out to be quite what was promised --

The second is the Good News. Jesus is the Good Shepherd because he is God's good news made flesh to show us the way. To guide

and direct us in ways that lead to life—not death. When he's our shepherd, we experience abundant life that no thief can take away. That no charlatan can replace with empty promises. “¹

The example of Jesus is far and away one of identifying with the sheep. He goes into the sheep fold ahead of us. He takes the risks for us. As the Good Shepherd he sleeps in the threshold of the gate to protect the sheep—warding off the predators that would steal the sheep away.

He calls each of us by name and we know his voice. He leads us out of the pen—out into the world itself where we do not need to fear because he is out there in it with us. Not only in it with us, but he empowers us to resist and overcome the very forces that would victimize us and others.

Jesus doesn't enter the pen, close and bar the door. The Risen Christ walks through doors. There's no escaping his presence. He walks through those doors to call those locked behind them out from despair and fear and into action—into mission—into life.

In today's gospel the Good Shepherd enters the sheep pen and leads us out not just so we can follow but so we can LEAD. Not only does he identify with us as his sheep, he calls us to identify with him as the Good Shepherd.

WE ARE TO BE GOOD SHEPHERDS. To be the voice of the voiceless. To show the way. The way into the fullness of life. To be the one who calls others out from behind locked doors, to be the guiding voices that lead to life and change within our society so all may have the basics of what they need.

We are claimed as the sheep of his pasture in order to lead others into green pastures and beside still waters. The teaching of Jesus for us today is that Shepherds look out for the vulnerable just as he does.

If we do not want a repeat of the horrors of a Jonestown or a Warren Jeffs, then we need to work on the social and political conditions that

¹ Textweek, Dylan's blog on SarahLaughed.net. for John 10:1 -10.

permit over 35 million people in America to not have enough to eat.

These are working people with families who are stretching their food dollars and denying themselves so their kids can have at least two meals a day. Have you ever grocery shopped at the 99 Cent store? If you have, you know it's a bargain. That's why you're there.

But you aren't there out of dire necessity. You are there because you are frugal and can stretch your dollars. But you aren't buying the majority of your sustaining groceries there. A lot of people in Fresno are. Go sometime and just observe the people and what they're buying. Ask yourself why. It isn't greed or poor judgment. Its lack of income.

45 million people do not have health care in this country. Another 15 million or so with health insurance do not have enough insurance to cover the cost of a treatment of a serious diagnosis or to pay for prescripton medication and eat too. Medical bills are the leading cause of bankruptcy in this country.

Our military personnel are giving their lives overseas for the people of Afghanistan and Iraq. Meanwhile, back home their families are barely surviving on their military pay. Many are on food stamps. Wounded and disabled soldiers come home to cuts in veterans benefits, months of waiting for disability payments, and appropriate treatment for mental disabilities. (Pause)



In Jesus day, "Shepherds had a hard life, since they faced all of the hardships of the hostile

landscape through which they herded their sheep.

Being with the flock, they faced all of the dangers and difficulties that the flock faced, and they were just as vulnerable -- to heat in the day, to cold at night, and to human and animal predators at all times.

They slept with their flocks on nights when there were few enough predators for them to sleep at all; they were seen as poor prospects as husbands and fathers, since they had to leave their families alone and vulnerable at night as well.

That's the kind of life Jesus lives for and with us. Jesus journeys with the most vulnerable, and takes on all of their vulnerability. He knows what it's like to be out in the cold. He knows what he's saying when he calls people to leave their homes and villages, and even their families, since he has done the same himself.

He knows what it's like to have people think that you're crazy or irresponsible because of what you leave behind and let go of, because people said the same things about him. And he knows something else, too: this crazy life he lived, and calls us to live, is abundant life (John 14:10). It's THE abundant life, to be precise."



And this is the life he calls us to as Shepherds of the shepherdless. He is Lord—he is the Good Shepherd and we as his sheep follow him out into the world to shepherd others

into the abundance of life God wants for all. Its in shepherding that the good life is to be had. That's where the green pastures and the still waters lie-out there in the field of life with the sheep.

But I have to confess its much easier to simply soak up the words of comfort in the 23rd psalm and stop there beside those still waters in those lovely green pastures and go no further! Jesus won't let us do that.

"Our challenge today is not to resort to faith as a crutch because reason has stumbled, but rather to acknowledge that reason, in its long, arduous search, has come up short and that where it has stopped it has pointed beyond itself to answers that only faith can fulfill.

In the face of the horror of the unspeakable, only such faith can provide the best truths to come to terms with evil, the highest courage to resist evil, the deepest love to care for those caught in its toils, and the profoundest hope of the prospect of a world beyond evil, beyond hatred, beyond oppression, and even beyond tears.

As ever, for those of us who profess to follow Jesus the Good Shepherd, the choice is ours and so also will be the consequences."²

But we do not need to be afraid for he calls us by name, we know his voice and we will follow only him into the way the leads us all to life!

²—Os Guinness, *Unspeakable: Facing Up to the Challenge of Evil*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2005, 238