

**Yr. C, Easter 4**  
**May 8, 2022**  
**Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan**  
**St. Peter's Episcopal Church**  
**1529 Words**

**Lessons: Acts 9:36-43**  
**Psalm 23**  
**Revelation 7:9-17**  
**John 10:22-30**

The first thing you notice is brown, a light, almost golden brown—as far as your eyes can see. Undulating hills of rock and sand, spill forth in seemingly endless ripples to the horizon. The beauty of the desert wilderness between Jerusalem and the Jericho Valley is just breath-taking.

It's also stark. In that expansive landscape scrub bushes appear as tiny splotches of green, little dabs of color on the barren slopes. There are also a few visible trees and shrubs, clustered in the creases of valleys where precious moisture must be just barely enough to sustain life.

In 2015, twelve of us from St. Peter's visited this wilderness one afternoon and were given the gift of time to wander our separate ways, sit alone, and pray. The Palestinian desert is an amazing place for quiet and solitude, but it's also very harsh.

Most of us can only take so much heat before we start to wither. Most of us can only take so much silence before we grow restless. Jesus spent forty days and nights...alone in this wilderness. This is where the Spirit of God led him...to face the tempter, the deceiver, the purveyor of short cuts and vanity.

During harvest season, the Jewish people celebrate the Festival of Sukkoth, the Festival of Booths. Long before Jesus was born, his ancestors would hastily erect little shanties, and spend seven days remembering how the LORD, their God, had guided them in wilderness like this...protected them in wilderness like this...provided food and water for them—like a Good Shepherd. For forty long years in the wilderness the LORD *was their shepherd*.

The Book of Leviticus commands, “You shall dwell in booths for seven days (so) that your generations may know that I made the Israelites dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt.”<sup>1</sup>

The root meaning of the Hebrew word for ‘booth’—*sukkah*—is shade. And the one thing you *must have* in a harsh desert wilderness is shade. The Levitical guidelines prescribe that the twigs and leaves covering your *sukkah* must be thick enough to block the sun by day, but *also*...thin enough for you to see the stars by night.<sup>2</sup>

See, this festival was designed for the people to remember the times of scarcity, but also...to behold the vast abundance of stars in heaven...and to praise God *from whom* all blessings flow. It makes you want to sing, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want.”

According to John's Gospel, Jesus entered the Temple during the Festival of Sukkoth and revealed what a Good Shepherd looks like. He healed on the Sabbath...so we might stop making excuses for not doing good or showing mercy to people who need it *when they need it*.

Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery...so we might stop treating women unfairly and harshly for the same things men do with impunity.

---

<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 23:42-43

<sup>2</sup> Philip Birnbaum, *A Book of Jewish Concepts*, rev. ed., NY: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1975, p. 437-8.

You know what's interesting? When a Good Shepherd shows preference for weak or vulnerable people; it drives entitled people up the wall. When a Good Shepherd asks hard questions; it drives privileged people crazy.

Not surprisingly, the entitled, privileged religious leaders tried to arrest Jesus. They wanted to stone him to death right *then*, during the Festival of *Sukkoth*. Ironically, Jesus was just like a *Sukkah*—providing shade for the vulnerable, *and also* a clear vision of God's expansive mercies, countless as the stars of heaven.

But the religious elite, they could *only see Jesus* as a threat. They would only see Jesus as someone to be eliminated.

The sky—it was the softest, pastel blue that afternoon in 2015. No clouds. Nothing to shield the bright, white sphere descending in the west. I squinted to see in the distance. I noticed some goats, nibbling on the scrub brush of a valley beneath me. And then, I could not believe my ears. I heard a faint, clanging bell. I heard a voice, calling out. It was a shepherd—leading a flock—in that harsh wilderness.

Good Lord! How on earth could you possibly tend a herd in this barren land? This must be what Moses thought. “Good Lord, How can I possibly tend to these people? How can we possibly survive in this wilderness?”

Good LORD—is *the answer*. We need our Good LORD to lead us. *If* the LORD is our Shepherd, we shall not be in want.

About two hundred years before Jesus was dodging the religious authorities in the Temple, Palestine was occupied by a different brutal regime—the Greco-Syrians. They desecrated the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, sacrificing a pig—of all things—on *God's altar* in order to glorify Zeus.

Antiochus Epiphanes burned the Jewish peoples' scrolls. Simple possession of the Torah was a capital offense. The Jewish people were forced to bow to heathen altars, on pain of death.<sup>3</sup> Yet, by the miraculous mercies of God, the Jewish people persevered. They endured. And, ultimately, the LORD delivered them from this evil!

The Jewish people celebrate this miracle every winter at the Festival of Dedication. (You probably recognize it as Hannukah.) You see, when bullies are ganging up on vulnerable people, you need a Good Shepherd, who pushes back. When the powerful abuse or neglect the weak, you need a Good Shepherd who will stand up and speak out.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus returns to the Temple—this time during the Festival of Dedication—and he reveals once again what a Good Shepherd looks like. Remember—it's only been a few months since Jesus' last scrape with the law—when they tried to arrest him and stone him to death during the Festival of Booths.

Well, Jesus is *still* not backing down. The authorities try to bully him. “If you *are* the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

Jesus pushes back. “I have told you, (you just don't believe me).” Then Jesus pushes those entitled religious leaders even harder. “You don't *believe*,” he says, “because you don't *belong*...to my sheep.”

When a Good Shepherd speaks truth to power, it makes the powerful angry. When a Good Shepherd refuses to back down to their intimidation, it makes them furious. We know this because in four short months, *these same people* managed to get Jesus nailed up on a Roman cross. They thought they had eliminated him for good.

When in fact, they only *helped* Jesus to prove his point. Remember what he said just before this altercation with the authorities? “A *Good Shepherd* is willing to lay down his life for the sheep.”

---

<sup>3</sup> Philip Birnbaum, *A Book of Jewish Concepts*, rev. ed., NY: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1975, p. 226-8.

That's *exactly* what Jesus did. And on the third day, our Father in heaven took this beautiful, faithful, compassionate life, and raised it up for all the world to see!

Jesus Christ. Is he the Lamb of God, sacrificed for the sins of the whole world? *Or...* is he the Good Shepherd of God's people, leading us in ways of righteousness and truth?

Both! He's both.

In John's Revelation people from every nation and tribe see Jesus as the Lamb, seated on the throne with glory, honor, and blessing for evermore; while in the Acts of the Apostles the Spirit of Jesus, our Good Shepherd, empowers St. Peter to heal the sick and raise the dead.

Do you hear the echo from last week's Gospel lesson? Do you hear that persistent voice of Jesus—calling out, like a shepherd—calling Simon Peter to follow him...calling *us* to follow him?

"Do you love me?" Jesus asks.

"Yes, Lord."

"Then feed my lambs."

"Do you love me?" Jesus asks again.

"Yes, Lord. You know I do."

"Then tend my sheep."

"Do you *really* love me?" Jesus keeps on asking...

"Lord, you know that I love you."

"Then feed my sheep."

I don't know where your path will lead this week. All I know is that the One who calls *you* is the same Good Shepherd who called Simon Peter. You see, the call of Jesus is for all the members of his flock to follow his lead...and to become like good shepherds themselves.

In the Episcopal Church, we don't *ordain* good shepherds, we *baptize* them. Every single person's covenant with our Good LORD, is to *practice* becoming good shepherds...*like him*. Imitation is the most sincere form of worship for the flock of Jesus Christ.

"Do you love me?" he asks.

"Then love your neighbor as yourself."

"Do you *love me*?" he asks.

"Then *strive* for justice and peace, and respect the dignity of every human being."

"Do you love me?" he asks.

Then seek and serve *me*, by seeking and serving those in need.

I watched as that little herd followed their shepherd across the valley, and into the shade of the next hill. "That's it!" I thought. The tougher the terrain, the more vital it is to listen for our Good Shepherd's voice. The harsher the environment, the more vital it is to trust in our Good Shepherd's mercy.

This is why we pray: "O God, whose Son, Jesus, is the Good Shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads."

Amen.