

4th Sunday of Eastertide
Sermon 4.25.21

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

John 10:11-18

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.” (306)

At the Lenox beach one day, a while ago now, I sat and watched the people, the lake. This was before I had kids. It was a lovely day, as I remember it. There was a hushed busyness about it all—until a girl in the woods to the side of the beach let out a scream.

The group of people that had been over there seemed to be an extended family—kids, adults, elders, maybe ten of them or more. I think a cake and some balloons were involved.

I wasn't really aware of them, any more than I was aware of anyone else—until the scream.

That got everyone's attention, again, as I remember it. I also noticed a man running out of the woody area into the water, diving in once he'd gotten as far as knee-deep. He wasn't even in a bathing suit, just jeans, a t-shirt. I think he'd been one of that group, maybe the girl's father.

Bees.

Somehow word of it traveled across the beach. The girl had stumbled into a bees' nest of some sort—ground hornets, maybe. Like land mines.

The next time I went to the beach, yellow tape cordoned off the area, as if a crime had taken place there.

Jesus here, in this discourse according to the Gospel of John, is eager to make it clear that he fully intends to lay down his life. His life will not have been taken from him. He will have laid it down.

This discourse follows the penultimate sign in this book of signs, falls in between Jesus' healing a man born blind and raising Lazarus from the dead. That last one will be the most astonishing one, the one indeed to bring the authorities to the decision to arrest Jesus, to kill Jesus. To bring Lazarus back from the dead was to deliver himself over to death, which his weeping just prior to doing it suggests he knew. So this, his death, was no mere sacrifice, it was self-sacrifice.

John's gospel is one whose first half concerns itself with sign after sign, Jesus performing signs that are to signify who he is and what he's about in the world. The word of God made flesh; the light of the world, which no darkness could overcome; the *logos*, that is the logic of the universe by which all that is has come to be and moreover to have meaning and coherence, now made one of those beings: Jesus comes as the ultimate revelation of God's creative power and good will. The signs he performed are to signify this, and the second to last of these signs came just prior to this discourse, Jesus healing a man who'd been born blind.

The disciples had called his attention to the man. They were wondering whence this blindness. Was it because the man had sinned or was it, since he'd been born blind, that his parents had sinned?

Jesus said it was neither. It was instead because the world was not yet finished. "He was born blind," Jesus is remembered here to have explained to the disciples, "so that God's works might be revealed in him." He went on to explain, "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day."

See, it's the work of the disciples to complete the creation. It's the work of Jesus and those who would follow Jesus to perfect this world, which is yet working out sin, working out unwellness, working out its own death-drives. Like ironing out wrinkles, you've got to press, press. Such was the work of Jesus, to complete the creation. Such was the work of the disciples, those of the earliest days and those throughout history right up unto these later days, to work out the sin and evil and deathliness of the creation, to bring it to completion, to sanctify it and fill it with God's light and love.

So, as for this man born blind, incomplete as he was, Jesus made some mud. Taking *adamah*, dirt, he mixed it with his own spit. This, *adamah*, was the stuff of which that storied first man was made, thus Adam. Then Jesus rubbed this *adamah* and spit, this mud, onto the blind man's eyes. It would make of him Jesus' own spit and image, completing him that now this man born blind could see. Finished. Complete. Perfected! Whole.

It would get him in trouble. It would get both of them in trouble—both Jesus and this man born blind. The Pharisees would notice that the man who'd spent his life begging there was suddenly gone, suddenly seeing, all on the Sabbath no less. And they'd investigate, asking the man's parents how this came to be, asking the man's neighbors and others who'd seen him begging, asking the man himself, who twice explained, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam [which means Sent] and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." But this only enflamed the Pharisees more, so plain a thing, yet so in violation of how they understood the world to work. For this, they drove the man out, out of their presence, out of the community that had long held him and donated to him.

Jesus heard that they'd driven him out, which earlier this man's parents had also basically done. Utterly disowned.

He went back to pick him up, to gather him as if into a new flock, a bunch of strays, the burgeoning church.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. It always falls on the fourth Sunday of Eastertide and in each of the three lectionary years it features an excerpt of this discourse that has Jesus reimagining what it is to be a good shepherd. No longer was it someone who would merely watch over the sheep, who though might run away should trouble come. Now it was to mean one who lays down his life for his sheep.

It bears saying that this wouldn't *actually* make for a good shepherd. No *actual* shepherd for *actual* sheep would consider self-sacrifice a worthy aim. After all, once the shepherd is gone, the sheep are all the more vulnerable.

So, the metaphor doesn't really bear itself out.

I imagine the earliest hearers of this would have noticed as much—which might have had them wonder, what was Jesus talking about?

What he was talking about was self-sacrifice.

It's a notion that gets mixed up in our minds. We might hear it as advocating for putting up with abuse, or for "meekly prostrating oneself before a greater power." We might also understand self-sacrifice as having the effect of stabilizing the status quo.

I'm reading a book that calls such understandings into question. Terry Eagleton's *Radical Sacrifice* "argues for a radical version of the idea of sacrifice, [and] focuses on a turbulent transition" as far as sacrifice is concerned, moving as it does "from weakness to power," from something done to someone as a victim to something someone might embrace as a witness against,

or an indictment of, the status quo. Eagleton's thinking sparks with "all the political implications that involves."

I think of Harriet Tubman.

I've actually been thinking of her a lot this week because it seems the site of her home was found, the plantation where she'd been enslaved as a girl. Archeologists digging in the swampy Maryland shore found evidence of her having lived there. It got me reading up on her.

Did you know the event that's thought to have radicalized her? As an enslaved adolescent, a girl who'd often chosen the switch over performing degrading tasks, she was one day expected to help restrain a fugitive slave. When she refused, the task-master, in an effort to maintain the status quo, threw an iron weight at the fugitive, but it struck Tubman, resulting in a brain injury she was of course never given the chance to recover from. It might have killed her. What it did instead was make her alive in a resurrected sort of way. As if having already passed through death, she was now alive in radical freedom, which she would bring to others at constant risk to herself. But what of it? She had already died and was now alive again.

When sacrifice comes from power rather than servitude, it's a different thing altogether.

Incidentally, this mix-up is what vexed Nancy Pelosi this week as she made a statement regarding the death of George Floyd and the triple conviction of Derek Chauvin. She claimed Floyd sacrificed himself for justice. She was wrong, of course, because George Floyd didn't sacrifice himself. Indeed, and horrifically, he had no agency at all in his own death. He was instead, and horrifically, a victim of sacrifice. What's more, it was a death of the sort meant to stabilize the status quo. After all, Chauvin represented in that scenario law and *order*. What Pelosi might have meant is that it's incumbent on us to transform Floyd's death from being the sort of sacrifice that stabilizes a though grossly unjust system to the sort that destabilizes this same system and which then unleashes a new dispensation, one of better justice.

God grant that we might have the persistence and fortitude to make this so.

This is what animates the chapter in Eagleton's book entitled "Tragedy and Crucifixion." This, the transformation of sacrifice as operating in service of the status quo to sacrifice as opening a new set of possibilities for the good and the true. As it happens, "due to a quirk in his upbringing," as he himself writes, he knows quite a lot about theology and Christianity, and so he doesn't take the "dismissive attitude toward these that most of his kind do." For this, he's able to note, in an homage to the gospel, that a "...key moment in the evolution of sacrifice arrives when the victims themselves become conscious of their condition, and in doing so assume agency of the

event...” Now not simply victims, they are active perpetrators while “...what was a process to be endured becomes a project to be executed.”

This, as you might imagine, has a radical effect, rather than a stabilizing effect, because those who would be victims, which is to say those who’ve been cast out to be sacrificed, “can now be signs of the criminal nature of the status quo, and by making this destiny their own can become the cornerstone of a new dispensation.”

Eagleton goes on to claim, “Christianity is the point at which sacrifice becomes subversive in just this sense. Every political regime comes under the judgment of the cross.”

That this is so is because of what Jesus here insists: “I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

This is what we’re doing here. This: praying and preparing to be a people who live in this life as if already having died, as if already having passed through death’s fearsome power and living at last in eternal life though now. This is what it means to follow Jesus, to serve Jesus to the end. It means to live in the world as if the world no longer has its stranglehold on us, as if we are so free in this new dispensation that the status quo shouldn’t count on us, can’t count on me at least.

And I don’t know what this will look like specifically on any given day, in any given life. The fact is we likely won’t find ourselves on some pivot-point in history. The fact is for most of us it might just be a matter of running *toward* a child who’s stumbled into a hornets’ nest—running toward her rather than away. For any of us on any given day, following Jesus and serving him until the end might simply be a matter of grabbing such a girl’s hand to take her to the water where there will be some safety and some relief, now though for both of us.

To be honest, that’s my prayer on any given day—that I be ready to run toward rather than away. And I figure that’s enough, a good place anyway to start, to train for the sake of God’s imminent reign.

That’s why I’m here. You too?

Thanks be to God.