

*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the*

**Fourth Sunday of Easter**

**Year A**

**RCL**



Acts 2:42-47

Psalm 23

John 10:1-10

**The Collect**

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; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

**Acts 2:42-47**

Those who had been baptized devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

**Psalm 23 Page 612, BCP**

*Dominus regit me*

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd;  
I shall not be in want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures  
and leads me beside still waters.
- 3 He revives my soul  
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.
- 4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I shall fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
- 5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me;  
you have anointed my head with oil,  
and my cup is running over.
- 6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

**1 Peter 2:19-25**

It is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

“He committed no sin,  
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

**John 10:1-10**

Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill

and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

## SERMON

It's springtime, so all the gardeners are anxious to show off their gardens, including me. It might come as a surprise to hear that I have a garden at all, but I have, and I'm very proud of it. Being who I am, of course, my garden is one of words and thoughts, but I'd insist that my garden is just as beautiful as anyone's.

This week, I found this little beauty blooming in the shade behind a row of cheesy devotionals and it particularly struck me. It's from Francis Chan:

**We may as well face it: the whole level of spirituality among us is low.**

Of course, it's not enough to say that our level of spirituality is low without giving some context for such a statement. Our spirituality must be low in comparison to some other time and place where it was high, and Luke, the author of Acts, gives us such a standard in the makeup of the early church.

**All who believed were together and had all things**

**in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.**

Compare this picture of the early church with the state of our churches today and you'll see why Chan made the statement he made. We seem to have a much less intimate conception of our relationship with God. What scares us so that we have lost that commitment and intimacy?

Those of us of a certain age read that passage and the image which appears in our minds is that of the hippies in Haight-Ashbury. Our next, panicky, thought is that this can't represent Christianity! People sharing all things in common is Communism! Communism is the enemy of the church, not its model! We know what Christianity is. It is attending services faithfully in a well-maintained church house, giving sacrificially to that church and working in service organizations



around the community. It's walking through the year as we always have done, preparing the Pentecost picnic and the other traditions we so love. Christianity is celebrating the birth of Jesus by distributing presents from Santa Claus. It's teaching the children about Christ's resurrection by giving them candy from the Easter Bunny. I hate to say it, but it begins to look a lot as if contemporary Christianity consists, for many people in our time and culture, in celebrating the things people like us like to do. I think Francis Chan agrees because after he said that our spirituality is low, he continued:

**We have measured ourselves by ourselves until the incentive to seek higher plateaus in the things of the Spirit is all but gone.**<sup>1</sup>

“We have measured ourselves by ourselves until the incentive to seek higher plateaus in the things of the Spirit is all but gone.” That is a pretty damning indictment. Sometimes, the business of my garden isn't just to delight but to inform. This is one of those times. In fact, we talked about this just last Sunday. Well...I talked. You listened. Mostly.

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<sup>1</sup> *Forgotten God: Reversing Our Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit* (Francis Chan)

**Believe me! God knows what a clanking, stuttering, dilapidated piece of machinery you are dragging around. The important thing is that you know it, too, and that you keep trying. Calamities occur when you decide that your clanking contraption is the best it can be, and stop trying.**

When we measure ourselves by ourselves, we inevitably conclude that we're the best we can be because we're a perfect match for ourselves! Once you get that idea in your head, it's dreadful hard to remove it, but so long as it remains, you will not seek higher plateaus in the things of the Spirit because you'll be convinced you're as good as you can get! It comes from holding God at a great distance.

Marcus Borg, and others, call this distant God "supernatural theism". He explains that supernatural theism imagines God as a personlike being. A long time ago, this personlike being created the world as something separate from God. Thus God and the world are sharply distinguished: God is "up in heaven," "out there," beyond the universe. When "out there" is emphasized and separated from "right here," God's relation

to the world is distorted, and the notion of God becomes harder and harder to accept. This distant God who walked away from His Creation is irrelevant to those to whom we offer it. I'd suggest we stop offering it.

So many of the difficulties of the church today are directly traceable to reading Scripture without understanding. If you take words which were meaningful to people two thousand years ago and try to apply them directly to today without accounting for that difference in understanding, of course you are going to make mistakes. When the people in colonial America sang about Yankee Doodle sticking a feather in his cap and calling it macaroni, they understood macaroni to mean fancy dress, not pasta. We hear it today and think he's decorating his hat with linguine. The first people who prayed, "Our Father, who art in Heaven" believed that the moon and the sun revolved around the earth on a crystal sphere that was not so very far up there, close enough, indeed, that the people

of Babel might succeed in building a tower to it. Heaven, and God, resided just beyond that sphere, so “Our Father who art in Heaven” wasn’t very far removed from the people who were praying. God was present in their lives, just up there. We hear “Our Father who art in Heaven” and we think in terms of light years, unthinkable distances separating us from the Father. If God is only “out there” then God is very distant, not intimately close. God becomes remote, absent, and the difference between a remote and absent God and “no God” is slender. Supernatural theism is the idea that God is divorced from creation. Creation is separate from the “body” of God. It stands as something external to Him.<sup>2</sup>

It follows from this image of God that the God-world relationship is seen in interventionist terms; namely, from “out there” God occasionally intervenes in this world, especially in response to prayer.<sup>3</sup> Otherwise, He simply takes notes on what we get up to, then adds it all up in a big book when we

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<sup>2</sup> *The Heart of Christianity* (Marcus J. Borg)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

die. Many people who say they're not sure whether they believe in God, or who actively say they don't believe in God, have this concept in mind. I can't say that I blame them. How do you relate to a God who "lives" someplace south of the most distant star we have imaged, a star so far away that light from it took 55 million years to get here?

Is there another way to conceive of the relationship between God and His creation? Yes, there is, but to find it you have to read the Gospel with understanding. Your garden won't grow if you just plow randomly through it! So let's read our Gospel passage with understanding.

The Gospel we call John was written at the close of the First Century. It was not a pleasant time to be a follower of Christ. Our faith sprang from that of the Jews, but inevitably the communities divorced themselves, and the dividing of the communities involved a lot of hurt on both sides. You can hear that hurt in our passage.

**"Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.  
All who came before me are thieves and bandits"**

That's harsh and it gives us the ability to understand the depth of feeling that existed. This division hurt! The hurt wasn't all one-sided, either. At about the same time, the Jews modified one of the central prayers in their liturgy, one called Shemonah Esray, or "The Eighteen", to include a nineteenth blessing against heretics. The "heretics" were Christians. It ran (and runs) like this:

**For slanderers, may there be no hope; and may all wickedness quickly be destroyed, and may all your enemies be cut off swiftly. The intentional [sinners], swiftly may they be uprooted, broken, cast down and subdued, swiftly and in our days. Blessed are you, L-RD, breaker of enemies and subduer of intentional [sinners].**

So if we are to read our Gospel passage with understanding, we have to know that two groups were pretty unhappy with each other, and that was the context. Once we get past the anger, we can hear the Gospel message.

**The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought**

**out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.**

HERE is the image we need to embrace, a God who opens the gate for us, who calls us by name and leads us in His ways. Nothing here about a God in retirement; nothing distant or absent. This is a God here and a God now who leads and guides us here and now, a God we follow because we know His voice! This is the image that the early church carried with them, a God so immediate that

**Those who had been baptized devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.**

**Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.**

Can we not, in the face of our current status in the eyes of our culture as largely irrelevant, let the supernatural theistic god go? Can we not reclaim and re-embrace the God who walks with us and talks with us and tells us we are his own? Have we so gone to seed that the only God we can conceive of is a distant, absent one? We are to bring the good news to

all the nations. That's the claim Christ has on us. Can you find any good news in the concept of a God beyond the limit of the universe who only appears on rare occasions to perform a miracle in response to prayer? Can we not turn our back on so arid a notion and embrace a God who leads us like a shepherd?

Let us do so, church! Let us do so!

AMEN



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*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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