

Easter 4, Year B
Psalm 23/ John 10:11-18

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St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Where did you first encounter the goodness of God? Maybe it was in your family at home, through a relationship with a parent or grandparent, or a favorite aunt or uncle. Maybe it was in that other sacred text which reveals God and God's Word to us – the beauty of the natural, created world. Maybe it was through art or music, poetry or dance. Perhaps it was in a particular church or group that helped form you.

I am convinced that the spiritual life is about **leaning ever more deeply into the goodness of God**, allowing ourselves to become – daily – more dependent on the goodness of God.

Gary Simpson, a biblical commentator and pastor, says this about God's goodness: *"The goodness of God is in every place before we ever arrive at any particular place. The good things that happen to us along life's journey do not happen because we have arrived. God's goodness has already been where we are planning to go. The goodness of God is so present that every direction we turn to look, wherever we are, we bump into goodness again. The goodness of God goes ahead of us, clearing out new ground, pulling us to new terrain, lighting a pathway in the dark places of new possibility, opening doors that no one can shut."*

Today's gospel reading invites us to think about the goodness of God by looking at that ancient and much-loved image of the Good Shepherd. "I am the Good Shepherd", Jesus says. So, what does that mean?

Well, first off, being a Good Shepherd is not about working a 9-5 job to earn a paycheck and put food on the table. Jesus is not like the hired hand. He is not going to bolt from the sheep (that is, us) when we face threat of danger, or wolves prowling around the door, waiting to scatter us. No matter if the sheep wander off and get tangled up in a briar patch, or fall into an out-of-the-way and hard-to-reach ravine, no matter if they get sick and weak, or nibble themselves lost, this Shepherd is faithful and will come find them and bring them back home to join the rest of the fold. Nothing will be able to snatch them out of God's hand. The Shepherd protects the sheep with his life. In fact, this truly good, beautiful, and model shepherd gave his life to keep us safe, so we would flourish together in the presence of our beloved Divine Creator.

For the gospel writer John and his community, it is not enough to settle for just knowing somewhere in the back of your mind that there is a Good Shepherd out there, somewhere, at a distance, keeping an eye on you. "I know my own and my own know me", says Jesus. "I 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."

John describes an extremely intimate relationship between the Good Shepherd and the sheep, between Jesus and those who enter into relationship with God through knowing

him. For John and John's community, you simply cannot access the abundant life Jesus said he came to give us, by merely learning things *about* God. Regrettably, sometimes we end up learning things about God that are not true, or the things we learn about God get badly skewed in the teaching because of human limitation, ignorance, and sin. John's aim for the community to which he wrote, and for us his readers, is to introduce us to God through intimate and personal contact with the beloved Son, Jesus - the Crucified and Risen One, the one who, because he loved God and knew how much God loves the world, gave himself to God's plan for reconciling the world, to bring the whole world back home to God's love. That was Jesus' vocation, his calling, which he accepted.

It's a pretty amazing picture isn't it, this relationship God desires to have with us? And it is not only an individual relationship God desires to have with each of us. It is also about the relationship with Christ in community, to which Jesus calls us, to become part of the "one flock" of the Good Shepherd, "the people of God's pasture and the sheep of God's hand".

Now before I go any further, I must acknowledge with deep sadness, that there are many folks, who for good reason, are not sure they want to become intimate with God. They may not be convinced that God is good or even cares about them. They may have been wounded by a church member or clergy leader, or by a church's teaching about God and humankind. This can happen when the focus gets placed so heavily on the power of human sin and how we can never measure up to what God expects, rather than focusing on the far greater power of God's goodness, love, and forgiveness at work in us to transform and make us whole. If you find yourself in such a tentative and uncertain place today, you are not alone. You have made your way here, and this is a most wonderful thing! I would encourage you to be brave, and try to be open, to look and listen for God's love, goodness, and deep desires for you. Don't stop searching and praying for truth and for assurance of God's love! Please seek out Barbara, Betsy, or myself at any time to talk over your questions and concerns.

So, then – how DO we go about experiencing more intimacy with this God of goodness and love, who gives us all that we need, so that we want for nothing? I offer for your consideration 3 suggestions.

1. LISTEN FOR GOD'S VOICE.

We are bombarded daily with thousands of messages – internal and external - telling us what we need, and must do or have in order to be secure, popular, successful, healthy and content. Because there are so many competing voices vying for our attention, the ONE VOICE we must make it an intentional priority to listen for each day is God's. We deepen our intimate communion with God through a life of prayer. Opportunities to grow in the life of prayer abound. As Episcopalians, our starting place is The Book of Common Prayer, with its offices of daily prayer, including Morning and Evening Prayer and Compline. You can pray these services alone and with others. Morning Prayer is offered on Tues. and Wed. mornings here at St. Andrew's at 9:00a.m. I read/pray Morning Prayer online. We can ask for and receive healing prayers from healing

ministers and clergy. We can engage in centering prayer and meditation. A meditation group meets weekly here on Thursdays at 8:30a.m. Barbara regularly includes in her weekly e-newsletter ways that families can develop and deepen their practice of prayer together. If you are not already doing so, begin to make space in your day to LISTEN for God's voice. It is so important for us to make room for silence, to let God speak to us of God's love and goodness that is at work within us, and within our world. The more we listen for God's voice, the greater our ability to receive and rest in God's good and loving presence.

2. REMEMBER AND CLAIM AGAIN YOUR IDENTITY AS A CHILD OF GOD.

Two weeks ago, on April 12th, the 2nd Sunday of Easter, we celebrated a baptism here at the 10:00 service. I must tell you, it was the most moving baptism I have ever seen or been privileged to participate in. For those of you who were not present, 6 month old Lila Hoch was baptized by Mother Barbara, with the assistance of Lila's sister, Bella, age 3. Now I watched Bella closely from the very beginning of the service. She was most attentive to what was happening around her, even looking up at Barbara as she was preaching. I think it was probably Barbara's familiar and caring voice which Bella is coming to know, that drew her attention. Barbara spent time at the Hoch home in preparation for the baptism, practicing with Bella over and over, using a baby doll, water, and oil. Part of Bella's role as big sister was to pour the water, using a small shell, over Lila's head 3 times, as Barbara spoke the words – "I baptize you - "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit". In reality, the first act of pouring in the baptismal rite, an act on which Bella was keenly focused, was pouring the water from the brass pitcher into the large shell which serves as a baptismal bowl, before the prayer of thanksgiving over the water is said. Bella was intent on emptying ALL the water out of that pitcher, even though there was more water in the pitcher than the shell bowl could hold. Talk about abundant grace and a cup running over!

Here's what I found especially powerful about this baptism. First off, I have never seen a young child invited to actively participate in a baptism before. What a sign of inclusion this was, giving Bella the opportunity to offer this gift to her sister. Second, Bella is a child who presents her family with some significant social and behavioral challenges, so some were a bit anxious she might have a "melt-down" during the service. What I saw was a child waiting patiently, expectantly, ready to do her part in worship. Most importantly, I was reminded of the power of loving relationships which develop over time. You see, Bella is the 1st person Barbara baptized after beginning her ministry here at St. Andrew's. I thought about the words of the prayer Barbara offered for Lila, immediately after baptizing her: *"Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon this your servant the forgiveness of sin, and have raised her to the new life of grace. Sustain her, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give her an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works."*

These are the very same words that Barbara prayed for Bella at her baptism. So then, at her sister Lila's baptism, Bella was living into and out of the heart of that prayer – *"living out grace, sustained by the Holy Spirit, exercising an inquiring heart, persevering*

in her given task, experiencing joy in participating in the work of God”, in the life of this her faith community.

Baptism is a “once and for all” sacrament that takes the rest of our lives to complete. It was a deeply spiritual and holy experience for me to see a child actively participate in the ongoing work of grace, both in her own life, and in the life of her sister. No person of any age, ability, or background is excluded from the invitation to experience the power of God’s grace to transform us. That day, my friends, we practiced resurrection!

3. BE OPEN TO THE WAYS IN WHICH GOD IS INVITING YOU TO EMBRACE NEW LIFE.

This is about attending to our “spiritual growing edges”. We all have them – those rough patches, those tender places where we need to accept God’s call to “practice resurrection living”. Often new life is nearly ready, waiting to burst forth, but we must first seek freedom from, and healing of those things that block our receiving all that God wants to give us and do in us. Some of those blocks include: fear; jealousy; separation and alienation; anger; a harsh and judging spirit toward our self and others; insecurity; disappointment; grief that follows loss and change. God desires for us abundant, joyful, vibrant, connected, and fruitful life. All we need to do is ask to receive what God wants for us, which will always be more than we can ask or imagine.

You know, we have much reason for rejoicing here at St. Andrew’s, because some of those “other sheep” Jesus talked about, some of those struggling ones, some of those hurting ones, are making their way home to God through the ministry of this parish. They come seeking intimacy with the God who calls them by name. The word is spreading about the goodness and love of God present here at St. Andrew’s! This is a community of faith being mightily shaped to listen and respond to the Good Shepherd’s voice. I believe this parish is truly hearing the call to model its life together after the life of the Good Shepherd – sharing compassion, joy, self-giving service, authenticity, accountability, and true hospitality and welcome for all. A community where each one is known by name, deeply loved, and has gifts to bless and strengthen all of us for the work of reconciling the world to God through Christ.

Friends, I invite you today, as you come forward to receive the Eucharist, to touch the water in the shell at this table. Remember your baptism and be thankful. (And if you’ve never been baptized – that’s okay. Make an appointment to talk with Barbara about what baptism means). Let those stirred waters you touch be a sign of your desire to practice resurrection living, as you once again meet Christ at the Lord’s Table in the feast set for us. Give thanks that the work of Jesus’ death and resurrection is an ongoing process in you, transforming you individually and this parish as a faith community. Remember to whom you belong, the true and living God, whose goodness and love lives deep inside of you. Of this truth, you can be sure. And on that goodness and love, you can depend.
Amen.