

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
4 Easter Year A
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I often wonder who makes the decisions about which lessons we read each week. Sometimes I picture a room filled with people delegated to this task: biblical scholars, who have crawled into scriptures for years and know all the nuances to the texts, and those who have the amazing gift of manipulating liturgy to really speak to the people gathered. Gifted preachers like our own Presiding Bishop Michael Curry who is electric in his energy to proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ to the world, from any text, are engaged, ready to set the text on fire with the help of the Holy Spirit. I also imagine this group to include regular people who sit in the pew, wondering what this religion thing is all about, or who can see the value of including a Quaker, who would call people into silence and prayer, when the way forward wasn't clear. I also imagine piles of scriptural commentaries piled high on the table before them, a variety of hymnals gathered that are designed to break open any text, and in the midst of it all, the still small voice of God, nudging the people toward the right decision.

As we know, the readings for any particular Sunday often contain portions that comfort and portions that challenge. Sometimes this happens within the same passage, as is typically found in the parables, where Jesus lulls us into a complacency of an unexamined truth we think we believe, until through some story, we realize our thinking was totally wrong, and we're challenged to repent, to expand our thinking to embrace a new reality of God. And sometimes the Old and New Testaments will speak to one another, one comforting and one challenging. I can think of lots of examples either way and I imagine you can too. Prophecies of the messiah in Isaiah versus the non-violent reality of Jesus, or the image in Psalm 23 of our good shepherd who brings us to still waters and the Sermon on the Mount.

I imagine that when the group of those charged with choosing the texts for this week were gathered, they were feeling a little "hot under the collar". I can almost imagine beads of perspiration popping uncontrollably from their foreheads, and windows being opened for a breath for fresh air, as they had a really important decision to make. Not with the pairing of the Psalm and the Gospel – these passages are both soft, idyllic, drawing us into the image of a God who leads us only into safety, shielding us from danger, providing our nourishment of all we may ever need. Who wouldn't want to believe in that? That's the comfort part. But where is the challenge that makes these passages alive and real to us this day? Isn't that also the purpose of the pairing of the scriptures?

The reading from the first letter of Peter is introduced, not as a counter-balance to the gospel, but as a lens through which to explore the gospel. And in my opinion, the group stepped away from appropriately setting the context to the passage, which is vital in opening the truth to the rest of the readings, by not including the verse preceding the one read this morning.

What those gathered in that room full of stale air decided to omit was this line: Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh.

Now admittedly, there are reasons you may not want to say this aloud in church, for after all, it implies not only slavery is sanctioned by God, but abusive behavior is as well. And if it is said aloud, from the lectern or the pulpit, there is a certain authority given to it. Who knows, people may take that line out of context and claim it as the truth of Jesus and of his church, and condone and encourage oppression and domination of others. It's hard to believe, but people do that. When I was in my training for Women In Need, we had someone speak to us who facilitated a recovery group for batterers, most of whom were court-ordered to attend, and he said, they all showed up with their bibles in hand, with this and other passages circled in red, as a justification for the enslaving their wife, abusing her according to their will, for the bible said, she was called to be obedient to them. So, I understand why we hesitate to say this aloud and leave it hanging, like shirts on a clothesline, for everyone to come along, pick up one piece and wear it as they please.

And yet, those with a social justice orientation may say, absolutely we need to talk about this, we need to hear this passage in church, and we need break it open, for human slavery exists today, as human trafficking is the second most profitable world-wide business, second only to the dealing of drugs, so we all need to understand how this story, which seems to support the act of being submissive to abuse, fits in with the loving story of Jesus as the good shepherd, if we're going to make religion makes any sense to us at all.

Even though every time I read this line, "Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh." chills go down my back, in doing so, we name the context of Peter's message, and then I can help us open it up into something life-giving, not something life-denying.

Shall we try it?

Peter addresses his letter to slaves who were abused by their masters. This tells us that the struggling church in Asia Minor, planted by Peter, consisted of slaves of pagan households, for how could Christians own slaves and/or abuse them, for that just wouldn't make sense. So, we know the household of God suddenly consisted of those who belonged to a different kind of family, slaves and women who understood Jesus' message that the household of God was one where all people were created equal, one where there was no power differential among members, one where one's value was dependent upon one's belovedness by God, which was open to everyone, not just the powerful and rich. So, there was some apparent tension between the distinctiveness which was Christian (saying we're all on equal footing) and the culture around them (which make distinctions between people). Slaves were used to "walking on eggshells", anticipating and deflecting harsh criticism or answering to their master's every whim, but now suddenly the stakes for abuse were higher, for the pagan masters could criticize and harm their slaves for their beliefs. People who believed in God suddenly found themselves

ever more the strangers in their own land, the exiles deeply alienated from their own society, and needed guidance as to how to endure trials, slander, and treatment as criminals.

And Peter exhorts them not to give into fear. He suggests rather, in the midst of trials and persecutions for “doing good”, for living as Christ did, to prove themselves faithful to the essence of Christ, with the deep belief that people will recognize that, and lives will be changed. His model for evangelism was, in my summary, “live a good life, by a quiet and steadfast witness to what you believe to be true, and people will want it too and people around you will be changed.”

Peter’s goal here was to ease the tension between the Christian community and the pagan patriarchal dominant household by showing another way, another way backed by the love of God. It’s a tension we deal with today- how do we be Christians in a world that at times can be set up differently.

Peter’s message to the abused slaves was not to be passive, and yet not to respond in revenge, not to give into fear, not to give into violence, not to return abuse with more abuse, or threat of abuse, not to give into the way of the world which is opposed the truth of God, but rather to be true to the Christ they believed in. Peter says there is an alternative. The Christian preference is always for an alternative to “hold fire under attack”. For this is what Christ modeled, when he died on the cross. Jesus knew when to speak truth to power, but he also knew when to find the power in submission, when to stop the cycle of violence, so that God’s love could burst into God’s world.

Sometimes our best choice when tensions are elevated, is to disengage from a relationship rather than engage in an escalating argument; sometimes our best choice is to sit in discomfort rather than make a hasty decision we will later regret, sometimes our best choice is to listen when we just want to speak or yell or cry out; sometimes our best choice is to set aside our own filter or agenda to imagine something brand new.

As Peter speaks to the slaves in pagan households, he teaches us that our choice is never binary. There is always another choice between submission and retaliation. One can be abused and not perpetuate the cycle. One can suffer ridicule or physical harm and not fall into the cycle of never-ending violent behavior. There is an alternative ethic. Jesus on the cross says God always has options. God always has life-giving options that expand, not limit, possibilities. There is a truth that passes all understanding, and that is the truth of what God said in the way the creation story is told. God remarked after the light was separated from the dark, when the sky from the earth, when the plants yielding seed were produced, and the waters brought forth swarms of living creatures, and God’s voice said, it is good. Yet when, humankind was created, God’s response was different. God’s voice, as the story is told, said, “And it is very good.” This is the voice that says to those slaves, and to us, that our self-worth is not tied up in how people treat us, but rather in how God loves us. This is the voice which cried out from the cross and through the resurrection. This is the same voice of the good shepherd in our story today, that same voice we hear in the gospel of the one who knows our name, that same voice that leads

us into green pastures and shields from danger, the same shepherd who guards our souls, who shows us an alternative in the world, a life-giving option.

But we need to hear that voice. This is how the challenge of Peter's message to the nascent church in Asia Minor and the comfort of the good shepherd in our gospel connect. It is a challenge to be a Christian in today's world, which contain many other voices. I'm not talking about voices of other faiths, but voices which surround us that speak against God's justice and for the injustice of the world. Peter's advice to us is to look for the alternative option. Don't meet vulgarity, hatefulness, or oppressive behavior with the same. Be a quiet and true witness to the truth of Jesus, and listen for his voice calling you. Jesus will lead you beside still waters when you need refreshment from this hard work. Jesus will open the right pathways toward the fulfillment of God's dream. Jesus is out there ahead of us, inviting us to be the soft glow of a candle held in the darkness, lighting the way for others. Amen.