

Pastor Madelynne Lindsey
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Jesus is my Shepherd – John 10:22-30

Let us pray: Loving God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that as your Word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today, and in confidence go forth as shepherds to live what you show us. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

A Lutheran pastor decided to pump up his Sunday message with a visual demonstration. So, here's what he did: He placed four worms in four separate jars. The first worm went into a jar of bourbon. The second went into a jar filled with cigarette smoke.

The third was put into a jar of Hershey's chocolate syrup. And the fourth, he gently placed into a jar of good, clean soil. And having done so, he set the jars aside and began to preach his sermon. 15 minutes later, he reported the following results:

the first worm - dead, drowned in a sea of Jack Daniels. The second worm: coughed his way into an early grave by means of a Marlboro cigarette. The third worm: died, covered in rich dark chocolate. The fourth worm: alive and well, happily tunneling his way into a new home in that nice, healthy soil.

This preacher decided to ask his congregation what they had learned from both the sermon and his demonstration. At first, nobody ventured an opinion. The silence was deafening. The preacher dug his heels into the pulpit, determined not to back down and to stare someone into speaking.

Finally, a little old lady timidly raised her hand. "Well," she said, "I don't know if this what you're looking for, but the evidence tells me as long as you drink, smoke and eat chocolate, you can be certain you won't get worms?"

That was not exactly the answer the preacher was looking for, so he assumed that not everyone got the gist of the story. It's about being shepherds who nourish and feed the sheep. Last week we had Peter getting the instruction to "feed my sheep."

This week's lessons pick up the Sheep and Shepherd theme but gives us the evidence we need to share about Jesus the Good Shepherd as "understudy-shepherds" – but it's not as simple as four worms and four jars. Jesus says in our gospel passage today that, "My sheep hear my voice...I know them, and they follow me."

That is a lovely thing to say and maybe even more lovely to hear. The imagery of God as shepherd is so common in scripture that many people know the opening lines, and maybe even the whole, of Psalm 23.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..." While the image may be poetic and comforting, I began to wonder what it might actually sound like to hear Jesus' voice. The Acts text might help us out here – bringing us in on hearing Jesus' voice from a different angle. Only slightly less well known than Psalm 23, the story begins this way;

Peter raises Tabitha from the dead in an episode so eerily like the one where Jesus says, "Talitha Koum" - "little girl arise" that you can't help but think, "The 'understudy-shepherd' really can do all the things the 'Good Shepherd' did!" Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas."

Her name is offered in *two* languages which gives us an inkling that she is comfortable in her religious community as well as in the wider Greco-Roman culture around her. The story goes on to tell us that she is known for her charity and good works who was always doing acts full of kindness, especially for the widows, the ones who were poor and marginalized. This is how she moves through the world. And then she dies.

We are not told how she dies nor the specifics of why the disciples call for Peter to come to her. Simply that the disciple Tabitha dies, and that Peter is in a town near-enough to be able to come. So, he does. When he gets there, the widows who are there show Peter all the clothing that Dorcas made during her time with them.

We are not told much about the clothing, but we know that scripture demands the care of widows who, at that time, were dependent of the community for their lives. Again, they request nothing of him; they simply tell him their experience and show him Dorcas' work. Peter sends them out of the room, prays, says, "*Tabitha cumi!*"— and tells Tabitha to get up. She sits up and Peter offers her his hand to help her stand up, at the same time calling the saints and windows back into the room.

The only woman in all of scripture to be called a disciple, Tabitha had cared for the widows, out of her own resources and in the most practical of ways -- she had sewed their clothing. It is disciples like Tabitha who are powerful examples of discipleship. But above and beyond the example of discipleship and the witness of a religious faith in a wider world, the story of Tabitha, the widows, Peter, and other disciples speaks powerfully to the way Jesus' voice is heard in community. Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice."

And then, the Gospel takes us to a cold winter day as Jesus was walking in the Temple, on Solomon's porch. John says that enemies of Jesus surrounded Him and said, "How long will you keep us in suspense?" Well, no they didn't. What they said was, "how long will you keep us hanging?" I like suspense in the movies. But to be kept hanging is a big bother.

It's like waiting for the other shoe to drop; nervously working at your desk, knowing that in a few hours you might be downsized out of a job or pink-slipped out of work. Hanging is your mom saying, "Just wait till your father gets home." Believe me, I heard that a lot.

These guys were annoyed at the way Jesus' words and works toyed with them and left them "hanging." They wanted irrefutable proof "if you are the Messiah," something so ironclad not even they could dispute it or disprove it. Well, you and I are not that different from those folks, so I am not about to throw stones, altar stones or otherwise.

The Gospels are full of people like that: If only Jesus would heal my son, my daughter, my servant, myself, then I will believe He's the Messiah." Our lives echo those cries for proof all the time. The signs are there – the grave is empty, but we want our own set of personal miracles. And that's what had those "Jews" so bothered and bewildered:

to have a man stand before them and remind them that both His words and His works were giant neon billboards that the Shepherd of Israel had come among them, to be both the Good Shepherd and the sacrificial Lamb of God. The shepherd is a sheep. He wasn't doing exactly as they demanded!

They didn't get it, He said, because they neither knew Him, nor listened to Him, nor followed Him. I like to think that many, maybe all of them, one day woke up to the truth in those days after Easter when the disciples were once again gathering on Solomon's colonnade to pray and to teach the Good News.

He calls His Sheep – He calls you, He leads you, He protects and provides for you and Jesus has great things for you to do in your own dual role as a sheep and one called to "feed God's flock" – because that job isn't left to the clergy and other called church-workers – it's for all of us to do together.

Don't worry if you're sheepish about this shepherd role. You have Jesus to share – God's love. He lives in you and only you can be touched in His name. Not that this task is easy - it's a bumpy a ride. Think of Peter, bold, then denying Jesus three times, then finding forgiveness, and then raising Tabitha (which, by the way put his life in danger from the Romans).

And Tabitha was the only woman in NT explicitly called a disciple. Today is Mother's Day and here we have one of many examples of women who served Jesus along with the male disciples, but this is the only one given the title. Our beloved Tabitha. And Peter was empowered to resurrect her - as he had been taught by Jesus - as he had been commanded by Jesus to go and do likewise.

He had a tough journey ahead of him as he did the tasks God put before him but being a faithful, Good Shepherd, kept calling him back, renewing his faith and working through him as the Holy Spirit gave proof in each new believer's heart that Jesus Christ is Lord!

Luke, the author of Acts, is indeed a great story-teller and this story of the revival of Tabitha is a worthy partner to the resurrection stories found in John's gospel. Tabitha was clearly a beloved member of the Christian congregation in Joppa, exemplifying the virtues of Christian life that we still admire and value right today.

But something might have escaped your attention – did you notice the last line of this story from Acts? Peter stayed for some time in Joppa with a tanner. What's that about? Luke has, I think, chosen carefully here – to the Jews, people who dealt with dead things, like butchers, undertakers, and tanners, were ritually unclean, and contact with them was limited by other Jews to sheer necessity.

The point is that the early Jewish-Christian people of the Way, and especially the leaders, were not operating under the same purity restrictions as their fellow Jews, and Luke not only acknowledges that, but goes out of his way to make a point of it – this is also true of John, who in his gospel regularly and I think purposely offended orthodox Jewish sensibilities.

This aspect of Luke's story would have been a problem for non-Christian Jews, but certainly made Peter more appealing, more "normal," to Luke's Gentile audiences than were the Jews and their strict purity rules. While Luke makes leaders like Peter and Paul more appealing by showing them as "regular guys who proclaimed the Word.

The Word has a way of finding us sheep and renewing us – if we put ourselves in a place to hear it. "The world is increasingly resistant to hearing the truth but 'I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ because it is the power to save all who believe."

Where will God give you the inspiration and the opportunity to share the evidence that Jesus is Savior and Lord this week? I can't say - but I know that we all have an opportunity to be disciples, shepherds. And, He'll be there to guide us each step of the way! Amen.

Today Jesus, your Physician, your Shepherd, your Savior, is calling. Hear His voice. Follow that voice. It will change your life. God grant it be so. Amen.

Let us pray: Now may God's peace whose son was brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, the great shepherd of His sheep, make us complete in everything good that is well-pleasing in His sight. Amen.