
WORD MADE FLESH

Fourth Sunday of Easter*

Acts 4:7-12; 1John 3:1-2; John 10:11-18

On the Sundays of Pascha -- Easter, the Feast of Freedom -- our contemplation of the meaning of Christ and our salvation deepens. Like the Disciples in today's reading, we are called to account for the source for our works of wonder in the world. We are called to account for life-giving acts. The death-dealing acts that characterize the mundane aspects of life are understood by the world as normal, routine, acceptable. It is life-giving, wonder-working acts which require explanation as with Peter and John in today's first reading. Their explanation: "This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone," the source of our life-giving work. They go on to proclaim to the authorities that the source of their healing acts is the world's salvation.

The knitting together of today's texts is one of the clearest articulations of why Jesus Christ is the source of salvation for the disciples. In Christ's words in the Gospel we may begin to understand why He is the "only way to salvation."

Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees in the Gospel; He is making a claim. This claim is not primarily about who he is, although that is a common way this text is read. Rather, the claim is about what it means to be beloved of God and recognized as part of God's kingdom. The image of the good shepherd that Jesus uses is a common one in Palestine. The good shepherd is not a hired hand; rather, his life is intimately bound up with the sheep; his vocation is to care for and to nurture them. The good shepherd is completely devoted and places himself between the sheep and the wolf, between the beloved and that which would take the beloved's life. The good shepherd knows the beloved, is known by the beloved, and has the natural disposition to lay down his life for the beloved.

God, the creator and lover of the world, "loves me," Jesus says, "because I lay down my life in order to take it up again." The meaning of the resurrection, for you and me, is in its liberation. Having "died to the world" we may rise anew, cultivating that disposition for loving and nurturing which lead to the fullness of life.

Christ is the only way to salvation because life-giving acts -- the works of wonder -- are never accomplished through self-interest. It is a hard and scandalous Gospel: only in co-suffering love is life called to herself. Only as the good shepherd, in devotion, nurture, a willingness to lay down one's life, do we dwell in the kingdom of God. This is the joy, the demand, the scandal of Easter and the deepest call to the human heart. This is the "stone that was rejected" upon which the New Jerusalem, the kingdom of loving communion is built. It is the model and meaning of the Christian life. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are."

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